

THE POST-TRUTH OF RACIAL FRAMING IN BLACK LIVES MATTER ERA

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Abstract

The year 2020 has a lot on its plate for African Americans to take and conquer. Not only that, they are dying from Covid-19 at higher rates compared to other races due to their pre-existing condition in the U.S., but they also still have to face the battle against racism in this era of Black Lives Matter. Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Christopher Cooper, and Chris Beatty are just a glimpse of violence against Black Americans exposed by social media, showing the world how American society is still corrupted and plagued by white fragility sensibility. Moreover, Black Americans are two-and-a-half times as likely as white Americans to be killed by the police, even though Black Americans only make up 13 percent of the U.S. population. These horrible incidents come from a distinct understanding between White and Black Americans, where Blacks are positioned to have an unshaken presumption of guilt simply because of being Blacks. This study aims at revealing a longstanding disdain for the truth as White people claiming to be fragile and sensible while subverting the reality and perjure themselves to racially framing Black people. In a society that Whites are dominant, Bourdieu's theory on field, habitus, and capital are used here to analyze the post-truth of racial framing along with *White Fragility* and White Sensibility in American society coined by Robin DiAngelo.

Keywords: white fragility, African Americans, post-truth, racism

Introduction

The term post-truth vastly becomes a defining word in contextualizing the current period. Several historical events such as Donald Trump's election as U.S president, Brexit, and the Turkish coup in 2016 symbolizes the beginning an era of post-truth. This term's popularity can be observed in how it is chosen as Oxford Dictionary of the Year in 2016. Post-truth, to quote the Oxford dictionary, is "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." (in Battista & Huebener, 2017, p. 34)

As briefly mentioned, several monumental

events dramatically shape the post-truth era's situation concerning how social media plays a pivotal role in altering public opinion. The proliferation of fake news and hoaxes that thrived by conforming readers' gut feeling, such as hyperbolically inflated number of immigrants -mainly Muslim refugees- is widely accepted by Trump's supporters, without bothering of checking the fact. (Willsey, 2018, p. 500) These phenomena can be summarized through Musolff's elaboration concerns

"The notion that truth is under severe attack has become a commonplace that is continuously reinforced by coverage of 'fake news', 'alternative

July, 16 2020

facts', 'truth markets' and competing publics, especially in internet-based media." (2019, p. 355)

Within the United States, the prominence of social media campaigns based on fake news and hoaxes propels Trump's popularity results in a polarized country. The ascendance of Trump is highlighted through a demographic vote in which his primary voters are dominantly white. (ropercenter.cornell.edu, 2016) Trump's victory signifies the dominance of the Republican party, which is majorly conservative or more often known as WASP -White Anglo-Saxon Protestant-. This political climate results in the increasing numbers of racial sentiments, harassments, and discriminations toward the ethnic minorities. Cases such as police brutality and mass shooting motivated by hatred toward immigrations between 2017-2020 highlight the shift toward intolerance in American society. (Peeples, 2020; CNN Editorial Research, 2020) It is estimated that Black Americans are more likely to be killed by the police than Whites by two-and-a-half times, although only 13 percent of the U.S population consists of African-Americans. (*Mapping Police Violence*, 2020)

One recent phenomenon that symbolizes the struggle for equality of the African-American community is the Black Lives Matters (BLM). This movement, originally a response towards the acquittal of a police officer, George Zimmerman for his killing of Travon Martin (2013) becomes the rallying cry of the African-Americans community, which underlines a recurring situation concerning disenfranchisement of the ethnic minority. (Chase, 2018) This movement manages to achieve major financial supports from well-known brands such as Nike, Starbucks, Levi-Strauss, and McDonald with a further pledge to eliminate racism.

Although it is financially successful, doubt arises whenever the aforementioned brands are genuine in their pledge to abolish racism or just an example of brand activism. (Duarte, 2020)

BLM's existence as a political movement plays a pivotal role in underlying the continuation of racism in American society. As briefly mentioned in the preceding paragraphs about America as a polarized country, demarcation occurs concerning BLM's support and on a wider scope, questioning whether racism still exists. The most notable critique of BLM results in their own movement of ALM or All Lives Matters. The proponent of this movement, such as Ben Shapiro and Brandon Tatum refuse to admit that black people continued to be oppressed within a 'systemic and structural racism'.

Regarding the differing reception of BLM and the denial of racism in a wider scope, the term white fragility is conceptualized by DiAngelo (2017). DiAngelo proposes this concept to underline white people's refusal to admit that racism persists and it is not only a thing in the past. She argues that white fragility is a defense mechanism in which any mentions of racial prejudice is intolerable. (2017, p. 38) This state of mind is triggered by the discomfort of anxiety in talking about racism, in which discussion inevitably shifts toward proposing a 'colorblind' view of equality. By proclaiming that equality already existed in America, the Whites refuse to admit that their status as White benefits them. This 'colorblind' view that claims to represent equal opportunity and meritocracy actually functions to conceal systems and structures given to the maintenance of racial inequity. (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995; Tate IV, 1997)

It should be underlined that the present disadvantaged position of African-

July, 16 2020

Americans is inseparable from their historical circumstances. The continuation of racial inequality in America indicates that racism, contrary to what their opponents assert, was not merely a past phenomenon but persists into the contemporary period or the post-truth era. The African-Americans were originally brought as slaves in the 16th century and remained considered as mere property until the mid-19th century during the civil war period. (Fuchs, 2012; Kaufman, 2006) Even after they were formally freed and legitimized as citizens, they remain subjected to segregation during the *separate but equal era*, which persists until the Civil Right Movement in the 1960s. (Guluboff, 2007; Parker & Lynn, 2002) Furthermore, recent case such as BLM that highlights the disproportionate rate of police brutality among blacks and the Covid-19 outbreak, which has a more severe impact in the African-American community, affirms blacks' disadvantaged position in many aspects of American society.

Underlying the continuation of racism, by taking BLM into account in the post-truth era, the present study focuses on racial framing and designate the African-American community as the one to blame concerning their plight. As previously explored, the post-truth era is categorized by mass usage of social media to shape public opinion through framing that thrives in evoking emotion. Concerning this study's scope, differing reception toward BLM underlines the white people's denial concerning racism. BLM that places the brutality toward Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Christopher Cooper, and Chris Beaty as a glimpse toward an ethnic minority's disadvantaged state is challenged by a counter view of colorblind which refuses to acknowledge racism. This study aims to reveal a longstanding disdain for the truth as White people claim to be fragile and sensible while subverting the reality and perjure

themselves to racially frame Black people, which is in line with the *zeitgeist* of the Post-Truth era.

Methodology

This research is qualitative in outlook that explores BLM's racial framing in the post-truth era by underlying several online sources. The focus of qualitative research is understanding the social problems faced by either groups or individuals. (Cresswell, 1998, p. 77) The data is taken from online news, article, transcripts from the interview, and video, which is then analyzed through racial framing and Bourdieusian reading. Besides the primary data from the aforementioned sources, this study also provides the secondary data from books, journals, or other academic sources to contextualize better the present state of African-American ethnicity in the U.S, which is denied by the White majority.

Bourdieusian reading that focuses on the formulation of habitus and dispositions based on individual and communal experiences provides an insightful framework to contextualize better American society's polarized state between the Whites and the ethnic-minorities. For Bourdieu, individuals who have different life experiences due to disparate social structures develop distinct thinking, feeling, and action. (Wacquant, 2011) This conceptualization argues that individual experience plays an important role in shaping their consciousness within a particular field. Bourdieusian framework, especially the concept of habitus, provides a synthesis between an individual's subjectivity and an objective structure that regulates their norm, behavior, and ways of thinking.

July, 16 2020

Several Bourdieusian concepts are employed as a theoretical framework. Bourdieu conceptualizes the term habitus, which is not merely linked to habit or behavior but a generative scheme in which an individual can accumulate modals and drive his/her action. In other word, someone positions in the world to facilitate their thoughts and actions. (Horvat & Davis, 2010; Lisahunter et al., 2015) Bourdieu defines habitus as,

“an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted, the habitus engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions consistent with those conditions, and no others” (Bourdieu, 2017, p. 93)

Closely related to the concept of habitus is capital, as habitus strongly influences both the amount & type of capital a person has. Instead of just focusing on economic capitals as Marxist reading tends to, Bourdieu elaborates on other forms of capital, which is cultural and social. (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991) The interrelation between distinct types of habitus will ultimately lead to competition, in which one side tends to dominate the other. Bourdieu conceptualizes the term field/arena as a site of contestation between two distinct groups. He defines field as an arena of competition, which is largely symbolic in outlook, mainly concerns with prestige. (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 17)

Finding and Discussion

This study explores the racial framing in which White people claim themselves to be fragile -subjected to White fragility- while in fact they are subverting reality

and employ their privileged position to frame the African-American community. Several news, interviews, or videos related to BLM, especially concerning the differing receptions, highlight denial toward racism by the Whites in which the black's community is themselves falsely accused. The refusal to admit that certain privileges of being white exist -the color blind- view disregard the present state of racial discrimination in American society. Bourdieusian concept of field, habitus, and capital is employed to explore the reproduction of social inequalities over time and the lower classes' acceptance toward it.

One notable characteristic in this post-truth era that blurred the boundary between true/false and real/false is the emergence of memetic images or memes in short. Memes emerge as an avenue to distribute and explore nuanced, complex truth in a simple matter. A meme is defined as a unit of viral knowledge devised by an author who disseminates it regardless of whether it is true or not. (Kien, 2019, p. 7)

One of the most notable memes, especially concerning racial prejudice in BLM is the Karen meme. This meme is associated with a white woman who employs their privileged against the people of color through their complaints, either for minor or completely fictitious infringement. (Nagesh, 2020) Several such examples are unjustly calling the police on supposedly black violence, prevent a black family from having a BBQ and calling for the presence of a black dad on a football match. While it originated as a meme, at May 25, 2020, where a white woman named Amy Cooper felt threatened by the presence of a Black man, Christian Cooper, and calling 911, this 'Central Park Karen' case begins to underline the issues

July, 16 2020

of systemic racism and police brutality.

This study conceptualizes the prior case of ‘Central Park Karen’ concerning how the white woman is disturbed by the presence of black man and the seemingly violent nature as an example of racial framing. This framing shapes our everyday outlook, as can be seen in the example of Amy Cooper. Feagin (2013), on his book *the White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter Framing* contextualizes present-day racial framing which includes non-linguistic elements such as images, emotions and even smells besides stereotype and values. Furthermore, even though the white realizes their racist action, they legitimize it under the assumption that no one will object their performance.

“Even when whites do racist performances targeting Americans of color, the old racial frame accents that they, as whites, still should be considered to be "good" and "decent" people. The dominant racial frame provides the fodder for not only whites' racist performances but also the means of excusing those performances.” (Feagin, 2013, p. 129)

Positions this racial framing within BLM sympathizers and oppositions, denying the existence of white privilege under the colorblind paradigm is employed to conceal the continuation of racism. The guiding umbrella of ALM refuses to acknowledge that racism towards Black exists, and whenever discrimination occurs, the black themselves is the one to blame. One prominent example comes from a video from Brandon Tatum, a former police officer turned Youtuber ‘Officer Tatum and hat salesman. His

video went viral in January 2020 and resurfaced following the death of George Floyd and the resulting BLM. Several of his statements deny the existence of racial framing and prejudices, by using his own account as example. (Kashprak, 2020) Compared to the ‘Central Park Karen’ that felt uncomfortable within the presence of Black man, Tatum disregard that account by claiming that,

“Or, how about this: You can enter a store and not be looked upon with suspicion, but I — a black person — cannot? Except ... that has never happened to me.”(Tatum, 2020)

Furthermore, Tatum also claims that his racial status of African-Americans, instead of disadvantageous is able to provide him with certain opportunities in job employment. His statement can be observed within the following passages.

“It’s been my experience that whites bend over backward to give blacks every possible advantage. If two people are equally qualified for a job, the black person will usually get it. Big companies and prestigious universities fall all over one another trying to sign up talented black people.”(Tatum, 2020)

Another denial toward the existence of racism is underlined through PragerU. It is a non-profit organization closely aligned with the right-wing/conservative perspective. Founded in 2009 by Dennis Prager, a noted conservative, this organization preaches that ‘values matter, skin color doesn’t’. Well-known figure, such as Kanye West endorses this view, through his proclamation that “skin color

July, 16 2020

doesn't matter, I have turned my back on the idea of victimization mentality".(2019) He further acclaims that "white privilege is made up by Leftist", which can be addressed as an example to appeal toward emotion in this post-truth era. Similar to what Tatun proposed, the view underlined in PragerU mainly refuses the ideas of racism through their assertion of equality, which is a colorblind view.

Conceptualizing several denials concerning the existence of systemic racism that disfranchised ethnic minority situates the problem African-American community faces in the post-truth era. The prevalent racial framing shifts the blame toward their marginalized status due to their distinctive family upbringing and heritage. It is important to underline that this racial framing, although rises in prominence during this post-truth era is not a recent phenomenon. As early as 1965, Moynihan's publication asserts that the root of African-Americans' problems is their cultural practices in which women play a dominant role. It was further claimed that the practice of matriarchy among Blacks reduce men's ability to gain education and practices needed for future employment. (Massey et al., 2009; Rainwater & Yancey, 1967; Urrieta, 2005) This view constructs misconception that the disparities faced by African-Americans is related to their cultural practice. (Patterson, 2006)

Pierre Bourdieu's elaboration of field, habitus, and capital provides an avenue to better conceptualizes the circumstances between the racial framing that disadvantages African-American community. As previously explored, habitus is concerned with how people think about the world and how their positions in the world facilitate their

thoughts of actions. The differing historical and cultural circumstances between whites and blacks' results in the different accumulation of habitus. The disadvantages in capitals further sharpen the divide between this two ethnic groups. Economically, Blacks are more prone to being segregated in low-income neighborhoods, poor quality public facilities, and facing difficulties in getting mortgage loans.(Feldman & Hsu, 2007; Rothstein, 2017; Taylor, 2014) Culturally, there exist stigma that black people only good and doing menial labor instead of intellectually challenging in which their tendency to speak in broken English further affirms this paradigm. (Green, 2002) Historical circumstances of North-South divide post-civil war period which is closely linked with economic disparities further disenfranchise the African-American community by limiting their network. It can be stated that African-American habitus is linked with their historical and current experiences to explain inequality that in turn reproduces racial disparities.

As a site of contestation, field/arena implores that the disparities between whites and blacks in American society are due to the different capitals' accumulation. Although commonality shared experience exists, diverse actions occur due to differing cultural knowledge in these spaces. Bourdieu argues that social inequalities are reproduced over time in which the reproduction is caused by retention of wealth, prestige, and power of the upper-middle class. On the contrary, the lower class in society, due to their lower capitals, tends to accept their habitus as the norm, leading to confirmation of prevailing racial framing. The disenfranchisement of ethnical minority, as seen in the case of African-Americans,

July, 16 2020

is inseparable from the capitalistic ideology that continually need laborers from the lower classes.

From the analysis, this paper argues that racial framing is employed to conceal the persistence of racism in American society by proposing a colorblind view. The prevalence of ALM as opposed to BLM conceptualizes a colorblind view that denied that several advantages occur due to their being white. Furthermore, white fragility implores the dominant population to shift the African-American community's blame by arguing that their current state of marginalization is due to their culture and heritage. Taking cues from Bourdieusian concepts of field, habitus, and capitals, the disparities of capitals being accumulated in habitus can explain systemic inequalities that result in racial disparities in African-American neighborhoods, schools, and communities. This analysis criticizes the colorblind view of social disparities by exploring the unequal power relation in American society.

Conclusion

This study argues that within the post-truth era that blurred the boundary between truth and falsifiability, racial framing is positioned as an avenue to conceal the persistence of racism in American society. By refusing to admit that certain privileges result from being white, this conception formulates a colorblind American society view. The emerge of ALM as opposed to BLM is seen as one example of racial framing to shift the focus from the marginalization of Black community into equality. Moreover, another conception from the refusal to acknowledge that racism towards Black exists results in the misconception that the black themselves is

the one to blame whenever discrimination occurs. By employing Bourdieusian concepts, this paper concludes that the differing accumulation of capitals causes the prevailing cause between this racial framing and the African-American community's disempowerment.

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July, 16 2020

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July, 16 2020

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