

## Discursive Colorlines at Work: How Epithets and Stereotypes are Racially Unequal

David G. Embrick  
*Loyola University Chicago*

Kasey Henricks  
*Loyola University Chicago*

*In a racialized social system, racial slurs and stereotypes applied to whites by nonwhites do not carry the same meanings or outcomes as they do when these roles are swapped. That is, racial epithets directed toward whites are unlikely to affect their life chances in the same way that racial epithets directed toward minorities do. Our central question in this paper is in what ways are epithets and stereotypes racially unequal? To answer this question, we rely upon a case study to drive our analysis. We argue that the symbolic meanings and outcomes of epithets and stereotypes matter because they maintain white supremacy in both material and symbolic ways. Thus, they serve as resources that impose, confer, deny, and approve other capital rewards in everyday interactions that ultimately exclude racial minorities, blacks and Latinas/os in particular, from opportunities and resources while preserving white supremacy.*

Keywords: stereotypes, epithets, discrimination, racism, reproduction of inequality

“What do you call a black person with a Ph.D.? Nigger.”

Malcolm X

“What do you call a white C-student who went to Harvard? President.”

Unknown

Actions of the powerful against the powerless are not the same if these roles are reversed.<sup>1</sup> In terms of race, differing social positions prevent white-on-nonwhite actions from being equivalent to nonwhite-on-white actions (McKinney 2005; Schwalbe 2001; Tatum 2007). Schwalbe (2001) labels this a *false parallel* “because it ignores the historical responsibility for racism; it ignores the huge differences

---

Direct all correspondence to David G. Embrick, Department of Sociology, Loyola University Chicago, Coffey Hall 434, 1032 W. Sheridan Road, Chicago, IL 60660; e-mail: dembric@luc.edu.

---

*Symbolic Interaction*, (2013), p. n/a, ISSN: 0195-6086 print/1533-8665 online.

© 2013 Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction. All rights reserved.

DOI: 10.1002/SYMB.51

in power between blacks and whites [and Latinas/os]; and it ignores the different consequences that arise, depending on who is disparaging whom” (p. 182).

Much focus of the false parallel concept regards positionality, or the status of who utters racial epithets or stereotypes. Some (e.g., McKinney 2005, Schwalbe 2001, Tatum 2007) rightfully point out that it is far from equivalent when a white person calls someone black *nigger* or someone Latina/o *wetback* compared to when someone from these groups calls a white person *whitey*. The same observation can also be applied to stereotypes. Because groups occupy hierarchal positions within the racial order, neutral power relations cannot be presumed and different groups’ epithets and stereotypes cannot be judged by the same standard. Whites have power and agency to deny and apply epithets and stereotypes to themselves and other groups, while blacks and Latinas/os do not possess such power or privilege (Bonilla-Silva 2001).

Slurs and stereotypes applied to whites by nonwhites do not carry the same *outcome* when these roles are swapped. When a black or Latina/o person calls a white person *whitey*, for example, it is unlikely to affect a white person’s life chances in the same way as it would if a white person called a black person *nigger* or a Latina/o *wetback*. Other than perhaps causing emotional pain, white epithets carry no *real* negative consequences for most whites. It is significantly less likely that a white person’s workforce opportunities or ability to move into a “good” neighborhood or school would be negatively affected in the same way as it would for blacks and Latinas/os. In a racialized social system (see Bonilla-Silva 2001), whites are afforded sanctuary from epithets and stereotypes that have historically justified the mistreatment of certain groups of people.

Though epithets and stereotypes cannot be grouped together as if all have equivalent meanings or consequences for various Racial and Ethnic groups, some have nonetheless made similar comparisons. For example, Goad (1997) argues that America’s obsession with race scapegoats working poor and working class whites for racism and ignores how the historically oppressed have become the oppressors. Blacks who celebrate “ethnic pride” cast “backwoods Bubbas” unilateral blame of bigotry and intolerance they, themselves, are guilty of (Goad 1997: 209–210). Crafting a different argument, Wray (2006) contends terms such as *nigger* and *white trash* “have performed much of the same symbolic violence” (p. 145). He critiques those who conflate whiteness with power (e.g., Morrison 1992; Roediger 1994) as obscuring social dynamics. Such a position, Wray (2006) argues, excludes those stigmatized as white trash, which include working poor and working class whites who have historically suffered comparable plight to blacks.

Despite criticisms, we maintain the false parallel thesis. Our argument, however, is unique in that we draw from Blumer’s (1958) notion of “race as a sense of group position.” Racial ideology is not bound to attitudes that individual members of one racial group have towards another, but a sense of group position that draws upon people’s fundamental understandings of the relationship between groups. It is comprised, Blumer (1958) argues, by at least four types of feeling shared by dominant

group members: “(1) a feeling of superiority, (2) a feeling that the subordinate race is intrinsically different and alien, (3) a feeling of propriety claim to certain areas of privilege and advantage, and (4) a fear and suspicious that the subordinate race harbors designs on the prerogatives of the dominant race” (p. 4).

We understand race as a relational concept that is located in emergent social action. Dispositions toward one racial group are intricately, and often implicitly, interconnected to dispositions toward other groups, and such relative comparisons are anchored in interaction. Rather than place primary emphasis on status of whoever utters these epithets or stereotypes, we focus on the disparate meanings and consequences of epithets and stereotypes when appropriated by members of various racial groups in an everyday context. By framing our analysis this way, we not only nuance the false parallel thesis but address some of the limitations inherent within its criticisms.

Our central question of interest is as follows: In what ways are epithets and stereotypes racially unequal? To answer this question, we rely upon the case study method. A qualitative approach was utilized by the primary author to collect data primarily consisting of in-depth interviews and participant observation. This approach was selected on the basis of obtaining information that was both valid and reliable. Sensitive topics such as race pose methodological dilemmas in which respondents often provide researchers with publicly “correct,” rather than “authentic” answers; they do this to have their responses reflect social norms (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000). Such empirical limitations are particular to much survey research. A qualitative orientation, however, provides data saturated with richness necessary to uncover how racial inequalities are maintained and reproduced.

Our position is that epithets and stereotypes sustain racial antagonism, and consequently reproduces an inequitable racial order. Because they mark status differentials among racial groups, epithets and stereotypes can function as political instruments of power. Just as Bourdieu (1977) stressed with symbolic systems of capital, epithets and stereotypes are instruments of power because they legitimize hierarchal arrangements when acted upon. It is through everyday discourse, as critical race scholars have shown, that racist structures are reinforced and legitimated (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Doane 1996). Thus, discourse conditions how people think about and interact with others (Eliasoph 1999). It fosters a medium through which the racial order crystallizes in everyday interaction, also known as the racialized social system (Bonilla-Silva 2001).

## METHODS

Data were collected for this case study by the primary author. The field site was located at one of the largest baked goods companies in the southwestern United States (henceforth referred to as Whitebread). Because the author worked at a local distribution center owned by Whitebread, initial hardship of gaining access to corporate business, a problem faced by most researchers, was minimal. After

obtaining IRB approval, as well as permission from the company's human resource department, six months of participant observation were recorded at one of the main bakeries as well as at a number of various distribution depots (from January through June of 2002).<sup>2</sup> Immediately following, in-depth, semistructured interviews, lasting an upwards of 2–3 h, were conducted with workers, supervisors, and lower level managers who worked in these places.

The study was framed as a project exploring class dynamics present in everyday actions of workers and managers in a workplace dominated by male employees. Through direct contact, the first author informed both workers and managers that participant observation research was to be conducted. They were also informed that their daily routines and interactions would be routinely recorded on a daily basis for six months. After initial notification, Whitebread employees did not receive any other warning that they were being observed.

In terms of selecting interviewees, snowballing techniques were utilized. This procedure tapped employees at worker, supervisor, and lower level manager levels. Because the services rendered by Whitebread consisted of numerous depots, some comprised of warehouses with 20 or more workers and others comprised of only one or two workers, snowballing techniques yielded an adequate sample of approximately 20% of the company workforce. In total, 38 respondents were interviewed: 35 with workers (33 men, 2 women) and three with managers (all men). The racial and gender demographics of Whitebread was mostly white (50% White, 25% Black, 20% Latina/o, 5% Asian) and male (90% male, 10% female). However, variations could be found depending on the particular department of Whitebread. For example, long-haul route driver positions were overwhelmingly held by white men while short-haul, inner-city driver positions tended to be more racially mixed.

### Procedure

Participant observations were recorded daily (Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday through Saturday). Jottings were written on notepads, which were kept in the primary author's shirt pocket, while working alongside respondents throughout each workday. Notes were recorded during work hours that usually began at midnight and ended between 3 and 7 p.m. To minimize reactivity effects, the primary author cautiously recorded observations either during bathroom breaks or in the confines of his work truck. In situations where observations needed to be immediately recorded, or when the first author could not do this in solitude, notes were covertly written on an inventory clipboard. At the end of each day, notes were transcribed and expanded. Participant observation was purposely conducted before the interview process as a way to locate and select potential interviewees, but also to frame how interviewees' comments could be interpreted.

Most interviews lasted approximately two hours, but ranged from one to three hours. Participants were asked to first sign a consent form, then were asked a

total of 50 questions dealing with issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality. These were open-ended and semistructured to accommodate each respondent and his or her time limitations. Where necessary and when time permitted, however, other questions were incorporated to address some responses and allow participants to clarify themselves.

## HOW EPITHETS ARE RACIALLY UNEQUAL

Before contrasting how racial groups' epithets and slurs are different in their meanings and consequences, it is important to clarify exactly what these terms mean.<sup>3</sup> In reviewing how contemporary dictionaries define various ethnic slurs, Henderson (2003) concludes they are words or phrases applying to particular groups or subgroups in ways that disparage or offend. Allport (1958) asserts they are often considered taboo and forbidden, which helps to elicit strong responses from others. It would be shortsighted, however, to conclude that they are merely words. Delgado (1982) and Lawrence (1990) have linked epithets and slurs with verbal realism: These words constitute racist speech that ratifies marginality, particularly for people of color, and preserves white dominance. When it comes to race, they are power words.

Racial slurs of differing groups are hardly equivalent because each term entails unique meanings, applications, and consequences.<sup>4</sup> This means they are context-specific in that each term is fluidly defined from situation to situation. We highlight various ways workers utilized these terms in everyday discourse, narrowly our focus to the most frequently used ones.

### Nigger

While the term *nigger* can be expressed as resistance and a term of affection or endearment by black people among black people, whites rarely use it this way (Parks and Jones 2008). Hartigan (1999) highlights that few studies have looked at how whites appropriate the term in everyday discourse, "which is somewhat unnerving given the term's broad circulation in this country, historically and contemporarily" (p. 112). The term has various definitions and applications, but nonetheless has common themes in these. Delgado (1982) asserts that people know the word is offensive and calculated to wound. This is what makes it powerful. Middleton (1999) adds that the term is undoubtedly connected to blackness and embodies a number of functions when utilized by members of the dominant group. Namely, it excludes others and signifies inferiority.

Kennedy (2002) argues that the term has long been the most socially consequential racial insult, but adds that it need not be. The word carries little meaning without context and to say otherwise is to transform it into a fetish (Kennedy 2002). We disagree. The term cannot be abstracted from the context it is derived. It is inseparable from a history of white-on-black oppression in which whites enslaved,

lynched, and murdered millions of blacks, and often did so as while using this particular slur (Feagin 2006). The same cannot be said for other slurs such as *wetback* or *whitey*. These groups' experiences do not compare (Bell 1992).

While in the field, the primary author recorded over 50 instances in which whites uttered *nigger*. Potter and Wetherell (1987) contend that discourse is about both *how* and *where* words are said. The epithet was typically overheard during seemingly casual conversation, ones that occurred in virtually all white settings. Not only does this indicate a particular comfort level in using the word, but it alludes to an awareness of the term's social inappropriateness.<sup>5</sup> Whites omitted "the n-word" from their vocabulary in racially mixed company. When the term was utilized, however, whites referenced it in a variety of ways.

*Nigger* is a versatile, umbrella term. Its applications were most varied among the epithets observed, and even embodied most parts of speech. Consider these excerpts from the field:

- "There's no way I can fix this shit. I can't even nigger-rig it."
- "I'm not his nigger! I don't do nigger work!"
- "Punching bags give you more realistic effects when training." "You mean like hitting a nigger?"

Such examples attest to the fluidity of how the slur is defined and used. Despite such variance, its everyday usage at Whitebread can be organized into three general themes which are reflected in the excerpts above. When utilized by white employees at Whitebread, the term spoiled blackness, imposed subordinate classed meanings, and helped foster a sense of solidarity among white workers.

At Whitebread, there was one situation where a warehouse gate was broken. Keith (a warehouse worker, early forties) called up the supervisor, Sam, and explained the problem. Sam told him to "fix it real fast" at which Keith remarked, "There's no way I can fix this shit. I can't even nigger-rig it." Sam laughed and replied, "The proper terminology is Afro-engineering."

When Keith said he *can't even nigger-rig it*, he implies the problem cannot be corrected the right way let alone in a makeshift way. These comments serve broader ideological functions that reinforce centuries old stereotypes in which black intellectual capacity is stigmatized as second-rate and subpar (Feagin 2010). Sam's response did much more than leave Keith unchallenged. He remarked indirectly by equating "nigger-rigging" with "Afro-engineering" as if they were synonymous. This trivializes the term's inappropriateness, legitimates raced knowledge that debases blackness, affirms the slur's usage, and mocks "political correctness."

In other instances, white employees used *nigger* to impose subordinate classed meanings. At face value these utterances may seem to elicit strictly classed connotations, but upon closer examination, they are intertwined with race. Consider a conversation overheard between Edward (a white warehouse worker, late 20s) and

Jeff (a white transportation driver, late 30s). While loading a transportation truck, the following transpired:

Edward: Will you take those tires to the bakery?

Jeff: No. No I will not!

Edward: You won't? I'm just telling you what Mr. Smith said. He wants those to go back to the bakery.

Jeff: I'm not his nigger! I don't do nigger work! The goddamn garage can get them with their small ass trucks.

Edward: So what do you want me to tell Mr. Smith?

Jeff: You tell him when he helps me then I will help him. I'm not a fuckin' nigger!

Jeff's words imply frustration with his own economic exploitation, in which he sees his white worker status being blemished. Others corroborate such an appropriation of the word (Hartigan 1999; Roediger 1994). The social location of Jeff is one that intersects others: he is disadvantaged in terms of class, but retains race privilege (see Collins [1990] 2010).

When Jeff says, "I don't do nigger work" and "I'm not a fuckin' nigger," he preserves what Rubin (1994) describes as a status safety net. She writes, "No matter how low they may fall, there's always someone below them, someone who serves as a reminder that they remain a step above any person of color, even a rich one" (Rubin 1994:38). Such frustration is undoubtedly an expression of group position because Jeff is commenting not on how things are, but how they *should* be (Blumer 1958).

Taking tires to the bakery is work that falls beneath Jeff's racial status. According to him, such work ought to be reserved for blacks because subordinate work belongs to subordinate groups. This is evident from what Jeff says, but also what he does not. He never says, "I am white" and "I only do white work" because he does not have to. Twine and Warren (2000) show how whiteness is oppositionally defined in contrast to blackness, so Jeff's utterances of *nigger* symbolize what whiteness is and what rewards shall follow. Jeff's words logically imply that physically demanding, less desirable labor should be assigned to blacks, while more cognitive and higher valued tasks ought to be performed by whites.

The final theme refers to how white employees appropriated the slur to develop a sense of group belonging. Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick (2006) draw from Bourdieu (1984) to develop what they label "white habitus." This simply refers to how whites tap anti-black resentment to foster racial solidarity. Their focus, however, is limited to the institutional context of housing, but their argument can be adapted here. Anti-black resentment at Whitebread served as social glue that helped unify white workers who may have otherwise had dissimilar interests.

Consider the example of Lewis (a white warehouse loader, early 20s). He was speaking with Mr. Kay (a white transportation driver, late 30s) about martial arts and how he uses mattresses as punching bags to get more realistic effects during training. Mr. Kay jokingly replied, "You mean like hitting a nigger?" In asking this rhetorical question anti-black resentment is thinly disguised as a joke, but it bridges

some commonality between the two white employees. It is the social glue of the workers “friendly” exchange and provides Lewis and Mr. Kay with material they both can relate.

The slur helps forge commonality between the two white workers, but it remains a racial insult. Blacks are denigrated because the bonding comes at their expense; they are the butt of the joke so to speak. When blacks are objectified as punching bags, whose sole purpose is to take physical abuse, such words represent forms of white aggression and symbolic violence that polices racial boundaries (Bonilla-Silva 2001). It is a verbal way of “keeping blacks in their place.”

### Wetback

What is a *wetback*, and how did the slur originate? Bustamante (1972) succinctly answers: “Those who illegally stream across the Mexico–U.S. border are called ‘wetbacks’ because they cross the Rio Grande without the benefit of a bridge” (p. 706). The term, itself, gained more widespread notoriety with the legal endorsement known as “Operation Wetback.” In 1954, President Eisenhower authorized among the largest scale deportations of Mexican migrants in the country’s history. This federal action, as García (1980) notes, sought to remove undocumented workers, most who arrived under the U.S.-Mexican governments’ agreement of the Bracero Program, to create workforce opportunities for troops returning from war. Such policy legitimized the term *wetback*, but it also conflated its meaning with undocumented workers.

Though the slur is typically associated with Mexican migrants, it applies broadly to other Latina/o groups. At Whitebread, respondents used the slur to overgeneralize the greater Latina/o population, and they did so in stereotypical ways. *Wetback* was loaded with stigmas that stereotypically characterized Latinas/os as lazy, violent, lawless, undocumented, and “taking over.” Below are two examples at Whitebread that contextualize these usages.

After work, Joe, Ron, and Stan (all of whom were white and upper level district managers) shared a few alcoholic beverages at a nearby bar. In several instances throughout the conversation, these men traded friendly banter and embellished testimonies about past experiences with Latinas/os. They liberally referred to Latinas/os as Mexicans and *wetbacks*, as if these terms were interchangeable and carried the same meaning. Such practices homogenize an admittedly diverse group and overlook their many variations.

At one point, Ron commented, “Mexicans are very lazy, but they’re quick to fight.” In agreement, Joe nodded and added his “two cents” by recalling a time when he entered a “wetback bar so wet that they were not even speaking ‘Tex-Mex.’” Describing it this way, he stressed the degree the bar deviated from the norm. It was not only outside of mainstream “American” (read white) culture, but it did not meet standards of qualifying as “Tex-Mex.”



Joe went on to describe how the place was unsafe: “The bartender pulled out a gun and shot a man sitting close to him, and then acted as if nothing had happened.” To him, this bar was a lawless, foreign place that harbored a culture of primitive savagery, which was off-putting given his presumably civilized upbringing. As much is evident when Joe concluded that this experience represented any other regular day at this bar.

In other instances, white employees reserved the slur to express fear. Many felt their status was threatened by Latinas/os’ expanding numerical presence in the area. White workers frequently commented how “they were everywhere,” dominating the local shopping areas and overwhelming the job market. Such comments further evidence what Doane (1997) and Gallagher (2003) have found. The notion that Latinas/os are “taking over” implies a particular type of anxiety, and consequently, many whites respond by reasserting themselves with outbursts of prejudiced sentiments. At Whitebread, white workers applied the term *wetback* to resist what they saw as a foreign invasion that threatens both their socioeconomic and racial status.

### Whitey

Whereas *nigger* and *wetback* are terms typically attached to *all* members of each respective group, some of the most popular white slurs, especially *honky* and *cracker*, have historically been reserved for segments of the white population (Hartigan 1999, 2003; Wray 2006). The slurs *honky* and *cracker* have distinct origins but typically entail similar applications. When bourgeois white elites historically referenced these terms, they used them to spoil the identities of “white ethnics” by stigmatizing poor whites as immoral, criminal, lazy, feeble-minded, and generally defective (Roediger 2002; Wray 2006). Groups such as the Irish, Italians, Jews, and Slavs were labeled as racial “others” who occupied subordinate class statuses and stigmatized national origins. Though these groups were not “white on arrival,” they did follow an uneven trajectory towards assimilation of “becoming white” (Jacobson 1998; Roediger 2002). Having elevated their material status and gained acceptance into the greater dominant culture, groups once stigmatized by white slurs were able to shed such debased identities.

Contrary to the slurs *cracker* and *honky*, academics have had much less to say about the historical roots and discursive applications of *whitey*. A cursory search of the few articles and books devoted to the term confirms its peripheral focus. When the epithet has received academic attention, it has typically been referenced in passing by scholars who justify black separatism (e.g., Hamilton 1968) with phrases like “beat whitey.” One fundamental historical difference between the slurs *cracker* and *honky* and the slur *whitey* is that the latter was not popularized by white elites but by those seeking racial uplift within black communities during the 1960s. Expressions like “beat whitey” are as much a criticism of white racism as they are a call for minorities to legitimize their own self-image (i.e., similar to the cultural movement of

“black is beautiful”). Hamilton’s (1968) defense of racial segregation in schools, for instance, demanded education achievement whereby judgment of all-black schools was free from white racism and racial stigma. The discursive deployment of whitey, to say it another way, is not a straightforward racial insult like the terms cracker or honky but a complex slur carrying simultaneous meanings.

Workers of color at Whitebread did not rely upon white slurs to signify inferiority in the same ways that white workers applied *nigger* and *wetback*. Not once did the primary author observe a worker of color say, “I won’t do whitey work,” “The crackers are taking over,” or “Let me ‘honky-rig’ it.” When a white slur was said by workers of color, it was used to signify power differences between whites and minorities. In one situation José, a Mexican route driver in his mid-forties, and Terrance, a newly hired Black man in his forties, were having lunch at a local Mexican restaurant. José, quick to point out white favoritism in the company, asks, “Why does Paul have a twelve thousand dollar route when mine is barely running seven thousand?” Terrance replied, “He’s a white man. Gotta take care of the whitey.” José then remarked, “That’s a bunch of bullshit. All of the whites get the better routes. I want a route like Lawrence’s with only three stops. I’m tired of having to do all these schools.” In this case, “whitey” refers to a work relation between whites and minorities at Whitebread. Terrance and José use the term to criticize Whitebread’s racialized division of labor and their own subordinate position within it. The slur is as much of a disguised release of powerlessness as it is a demarcation of whiteness. The primary author recorded numerous similar instances in which Terrace, José, and other nonwhite workers uttered the words “whitey,” “whiteboy,” or “whites.” However, as in the scenario presented above the context of the epithets are the same. For nonwhite workers at Whitebread, the issue at hand was powerlessness.

Herein lays a finding that runs counter-intuitive to what is already known about white slurs. Whereas scholars like Hartigan (1999, 2003) and Wray (2006) rightfully reveal how white elites have historically deployed epithets as cloaked class pejoratives against other whites, their analyses have remained more or less restricted to relationships of elite whites among other poor whites. This focus is important because it reveals how “insider” and “outsider” statuses can persist among one racial group,<sup>6</sup> but it does not place whiteness within an intergroup context. Blumer (1958) noted long ago how race is a relational concept and therefore groups ought to be analyzed in reference to one another. Whiteness carries significantly less meaning unless blackness, brownness, and so on is also accounted for. The comments of Whitebread’s workers of color reveal how the meanings of white slurs bend significantly when removed from an intraracial to interracial context.

When Whitebread’s workers of color draw upon white slurs to communicate, they deploy them in ways that mute class differences between, for instance, white management and white laborers. Whereas Hartigan (1999, 2003) and Wray (2006) reveal how slurs spoil white working class identity as unworthy of invisible white normativity, Terrance’s and José’s usage of whitey marks a sense inclusion and belonging among all whites at Whitebread. It unmaskes white dominance hidden

from plain view, stresses the centrality of race in organizing who gets better trucking routes, and acknowledges minority exclusion within the company. The boundary work being performed by this application of slurs marks racial distance for sure, but it is a type of distance that does not spoil whiteness but affirms the fundamental hierarchal arrangement between whites and minorities.

## HOW STEREOTYPES ARE RACIALLY UNEQUAL

When social scientists speak of stereotypes, they are generally referring to group generalizations. As Allport (1958) points out, stereotypes offer distinctive characterizations of each racial group because they yield categories of perceived similarity and difference. Lippmann (1922), the journalist who coined the term, contends that stereotypes offer a form of short-hand thinking that people come to rely on when absent of other information. They simplify a cumbersome real world that “is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting, for direct acquaintance” (Lippmann 1922: 16).

Just as racial epithets are not equivalent, racial stereotypes are not either. From our data, we contend stereotypes are racially unequal in two ways. One, they disproportionately describe whites positively and blacks and Latinas/os negatively. And two, white stereotypes are more three-dimensional, pluralistic, and even contradictory in nature, whereas nonwhite stereotypes, especially black and Latina/o ones, characterize these groups in a one-dimensional, monolithic manner.

Stereotypes disproportionately describe some groups, especially whites, positively and other groups negatively (see Table 1). Racially unequal stereotypes are significant because they mark hierarchal differences in which whites are

TABLE 1. Common Stereotypes for Whites, Blacks, and Latinas/os

| Whites   | Blacks  | Latinas/os                                     |
|--|---|--|
| Individualistic (in principle, everyone is equal)              | Lazy, no work ethic, undependable   | Hyper-sensitive to racial issues               |
| Meritocratic (success is based on hard work and determination) | Hyper-sensitive to racial issues  | Culturally distinct; group-, familial-centered |
| Elite, powerful (possess much privilege and authority)         | Biologically different: intellectually inferior, beast-like physical features | Inhuman, animal-like                           |
| Noble, humanitarian  | Dependency mentality (“freeloader” mindset)                                   | All of Mexican descent                         |
| “Hillbilly,” “rednecks”  | Primitive, savages, inhuman   | Prone to violence                              |
| Rich and wealthy   | Deviant, criminal-minded  | Lazy, no work ethic, undependable              |
|  | Worthless   |  |
|  | Destined for menial, physical labor   |  |
|  | Prone to violence   |  |

characterized with more desirable stereotypes and nonwhites, particularly blacks and Latinas/os, are labeled otherwise. That is, stereotypes are reflective of each group's position within the racial order.<sup>7</sup>

Comparing the groups listed in Table 1, white stereotypes have much more positive connotations than black and Latina/o stereotypes. Though some white stereotypes can be negative, (e.g., “rednecks,” “hillbilly”), most carry positive connotations. Consider, for example, how whites are stereotyped as powerful, wealthy, meritocratic, and noble. In contrast, black and Latina/o stereotypes do not characterize these groups in much, if any of a positive light. Instead, blacks are stereotyped as lazy, hyper-sensitive to racial issues, biologically inferior, dependent, primitive, deviant, worthless, good for little else besides manual labor, and prone to violence. Latinas/os, like blacks, are overly generalized as being hyper-sensitive to racial issues, lazy, and prone to violence, but they are also uniquely stereotyped as being culturally different, inhuman, and all of Mexican descent.

Though whites are certainly stereotyped in a more positive light compared to blacks and Latinas/os, our analysis would be shortsighted if we did not address some inconsistencies within white stereotypes. Not all are positive or desirable. For example, being labeled a hillbilly or redneck hardly carries positive connotations in many contexts. These stereotypes contrast with positive framings of whiteness such as whites being stereotyped as powerful, wealthy, and noble. Juxtaposing these, it is axiomatic that white stereotypes are not only inconsistent but counter-intuitive. Our data suggest the same cannot be said for other racial groups.

Blacks and Latinas/os are stereotyped in a more singular and monolithic manner, which conceals each group's heterogeneity.<sup>8</sup> Consider an account recalled by George, a white transportation driver in his late thirties. When asked if he had witnessed any acts of racism at the workplace, he claimed that he indeed had (as did a majority of the respondents). In fact, he recounted an incident that reinforces negative stereotypes and crystallizes monolithic notions of blackness.

This happened a little . . . [PAUSE] . . . a little while ago. One individual was ill. And it was during a crisis time that we had to do with the company and has no other individuals to back up his run. And the individual that was in charge pretty much called him a worthless Black son of a gun and that pretty much all of them are like that.

Here, George describes an incident in which a superior draws from a host of negative stereotypes, from blacks being lazy and lacking work ethic to being undependable. This management member then applies these unreliable generalizations to someone who could not work due to illness, as if this person is a representative of some undifferentiated racial group.

In short, black and Latina/o stereotypes do not counter or contradict each other as do white stereotypes. White stereotypes seemingly acknowledge intragroup variations because they lend uneven generalizations of the group. The pluralistic and contradictory nature of white stereotypes prevents whites from being characterized

in a one-dimensional manner. For blacks and Latinas/os, on the other hand, their stereotypes color them in a persistently negative light. Stereotypes label blacks and Latinas/os as a whole as if these groups were homogenous and possess a coherent identity. In this sense, stereotypes undermine singular notions of whiteness, but they crystallize monolithic notions of blackness and brownness. As Farough (2004) points out, such racialized notions helped actors to view whites as individuals, but nonwhites as group representatives.

## WORKPLACE CONSEQUENCES OF RACIAL DISCOURSE

Our analysis shows not only how epithets and stereotypes are persistently utilized in the workplace setting, but how they are racially unequal in terms of their outcomes. It is through such usage that the color line extends on an everyday basis. Discourse does not consist of mere abstractions disconnected from the material world in which we live (Collins [1990] 2010). Racetalk is political, and by extension, so are racial epithets and stereotypes. At Whitebread, they had real on-the-job consequences in terms of how material and symbolic rewards were distributed, and such effects legitimated racial inequalities in a number of areas. To illustrate how discourse exemplifies expressions of domination, we turn our focus to concrete examples at Whitebread in which epithets and stereotypes affected employment opportunity, work evaluations, and psychological wages.

During an interview, Larry (a white warehouse worker, middle 20s) commented about how few people of color worked at Whitebread and management rarely took the opportunity to employ them. "For all the years that I've been working here and people who've been working before," Larry recalled, "all the opportune times that they've had chances to hire a black man they have never done so until now." He further went to discuss how the recently hired person of color was fired. After speaking with management about this issue, Larry understood why so few persons of color worked at Whitebread. "[The supervisor] said that he didn't really like the person. He didn't want to hire him. And I mean just constantly going on and on and on about just stuff, and he told me on the side that he didn't like black people in general. He thought that they were lazy and they didn't work well." Here, these negative black stereotypes served as a symbolic liability that was converted into a material loss for this particular person of color.

While race colors employment opportunity and retention, it also affects how employees are evaluated and disciplined. Persons of color are held to higher standards and punished more severely when those standards are violated, whereas whites receive more benefit of the doubt and face less restitution when proven to be wrong. In one instance, Douglas (a white district manager, middle to late 40s) terminated a black male driver named Calvert. According to several workers, Calvert was a "token" employee, and Douglas was forced by his superiors to hire him and give the impression that the company was egalitarian, at least on paper in terms of workforce composition. Calvert's termination occurred after one year of

employment, and several coworkers were disgruntled with this decision. They felt as though Douglas' actions were petty and unjustified.

Following his termination, Calvert filed a discrimination lawsuit against Douglas for his utterances of epithets and stereotypes regarding blacks and Latinas/os that reinforced negative stigmas. Several of these comments were corroborated by current employees to triangulate the reliability and authenticity of such accounts. Nonetheless, Douglas was not reprimanded by superiors at Whitebread, and Calvin's position was never restored nor was he compensated for the symbolic violence he incurred.

Du Bois ([1935] 1992) long ago discussed what he labeled wages of whiteness. With whiteness comes the compensation of "a sort of public and psychological wage. [Whites] are given public deference and titles of courtesy because they are white" (Du Bois [1935] 1992: 700). In other words, whites enjoy an unearned positive self-image by which they are valued above racial others. José (a Latino sales representative, early 40s) was keenly aware of this when reflecting upon his experiences at Whitebread:

[Whites] don't ever treat you like an equal, because they think they're better. . . . I don't think they're smarter than me! I didn't even go to college and they got some of these guys, ummm they went to college. I mean I didn't even finish high school and I'm doing the same job they are, so I don't think. What makes them better than me?

Here, José acknowledges a particular type of white elitism, or what others have called "sincere fictions of the white self" (see Feagin 2006). Whites self-proclaim a higher social estimation in which they see themselves as "better than" racial others. Though José disagrees with this assessment, he nonetheless must deal with it when he interacts with white coworkers and answers to white superiors on an everyday basis. That is, he must constantly confront the notion that he is viewed as inferior and inadequate by other whites, and thus must take extra precaution to defy negative stigmas attached to his ethnic group. This is not something his white coworkers confront. They do not have to "unpack the invisible knapsack of white privilege" and question whether their racial status will be a criteria by which their work performance will be evaluated and something that must be overcome (McIntosh [1988] 2007). Instead, whites presume their superior status to be a result of merit and individual effort (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2006). This lends a particular edge, or psychological wage.

## THE BROADER SOCIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF RACIALLY UNEQUAL EPITHETS AND STEREOTYPES

Bonilla-Silva (2001) asserts that in a racialized social system, material and symbolic rewards are allocated along racial lines, and the quintessential cornerstone to this structure is racial ideology. For its continued sustenance, however, this ideology relies

upon effective appropriations of epithets and stereotypes to organize the racial order. While this theoretical orientation paints broad brushstrokes of racialized structure, it does not fully synthesize the macro with the micro. It offers little insight of *how* racial inequality manifests as an emergent phenomenon. In our own work, we have tried to bridge this gap by examining the application of epithets and stereotypes in everyday interaction to better illuminate some of the processes in which racial rewards and penalties are organized.

In “Society as Symbolic Interaction,” Blumer ([1969] 1998) writes, “There is no empirically observable activity in a human society that does not spring from an acting unit” (p. 84). This means that higher ordered concepts like a racialized social system spring from lower ordered concepts individual action. Reiterated everyday interactions that utilize epithets and stereotypes cumulatively create and recreate racial disparity in workplaces like Whitebread, but also in other areas outside of employment like housing and education. Such interactions, however, do not occur in a vacuum. Blumer ([1962] 1998) clarifies, “[M]ost of the situations encountered by people in a given society are defined or ‘structured’ by them in the same way. Through previous interaction they develop and acquire common understandings or definitions of how to act in this or that situation” (p. 86). In other words structure springs from interaction, but this structure goes on to develop autonomy and shape interaction in its own right.<sup>9</sup> The micro and macro are not only dialectically intertwined but make fine bedfellows.

The practices in which workers at Whitebread applied epithets and stereotypes have broader social significance for racial inequality because they represent how white supremacy is preserved through emergence in symbolic ways to reinforce material inequities. Because acted-upon epithets and stereotypes are racially unequal, their consequences’ further crystallize each group’s location within the racial order. They serve as resources that impose, confer, deny, and approve other capital rewards in everyday interactions. That is, they further exclude racial minorities, blacks and Latinas/os in particular, from opportunities and resources, all the while preserving the superior status of whites. Such everyday interaction extends divisions of power inherently drawn along racial lines.

## NOTES

1. Understanding that people occupy positions of power, or lack thereof, is not a straightforward or simplistic matter. People are situated within a host of social locations, ones that are simultaneously raced, classed, gendered, and so on, and this positions people within a complex web of intersecting hierarchies (Collins [1990] 2010). In this way, people can, and often do, embody relations of both advantage and disadvantage at the same time. While this intersectional distribution of power exists, it is also true that a distinct hierarchy of differentiated power exists among racial groups. Whiteness represents a particular social position that disproportionately confers certain economic, cultural, symbolic, social, and psychological advantages that are either unavailable or limited to people of color (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Lewis 2004).
2. We recognize the limitations that come with using an older data set. However, we also understand that in a racialized social system (Bonilla-Silva 2001), epithets and stereotypes are used as ways

to justify the current social and racial order. Further, it is not a question of whether epithets and stereotypes change, but rather the correlation between their use in everyday interactions and racial fears present in any particular moment in time (Myers 2005). That said, we do not question whether epithets and stereotypes are any worse today than a decade ago, or even a century. Our point in this particular paper is to address the ways in which epithets and stereotypes are racially unequal and how such inequities help to maintain the current racial order. Thus, our contribution to the literature lies in understanding the disparate meaning and consequences of epithets and stereotypes when appropriated by members of various racial groups in an everyday context. For these reasons, we believe our data set provides an accurate pool from which to base our analysis.

3. Epithets and slurs can be distinctly defined, but for our purposes we conflate these terms and use them interchangeably.
4. While much of our analytic attention emphasizes how epithets and slurs (and stereotypes) constitute a form of raced discourse, this very discourse is often times also classed and gendered. These words do not exist in a racial vacuum, but instead they can, and often do, intersect with a host of classed and gendered meanings that reinforce various class and gender hierarchies. Our rationale of a race-driven emphasis is to better understand the centrality, not exclusivity, that race carries on discourse.
5. For a more detailed analysis of explicitly racist sentiments that occur in “private” everyday discourse among whites, see Houts Picca and Feagin (2007), McDermott (2006), McKinney (2005), and Myers (2005).
6. Bonilla-Silva (2001), Goldberg (2002), and Jackman (1994) note the ideological importance that contradictions have in maintaining racial dominance. Intragroup variation among whites, as reflected by the plurality of white epithets (and stereotypes), helps mediate and divert intergroup conflict by masking race as a source of material division. Contradictions afford space for accommodation, flexibility, and exceptions. Though epithets and negative stereotypes spoil whiteness, this spoilage is reserved for whites of lower class backgrounds. The dominant status of other whites is preserved.
7. Though others have made this point (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2001; Bobo and Massagli 2001; Henricks 2011), they have not shown how these stereotypes are emergent in everyday interactions. Bonilla-Silva’s (2001) thesis lacks an empirical foundation, while Bobo and Massagli (2001) and Henricks (2011) rely upon survey data to substantiate their arguments. This is problematic, particularly since the authors identify with the symbolic interaction tradition, because Blumer (1955, 1958) asserts collective racial interests are anchored in locally-situated contexts where group members express their sense of group position through variably complex interactions. The perspective orients itself toward participant observation because at the heart of symbolic interaction are experiences (Denzin 1992).
8. To further elaborate our point, no positive stereotypes for blacks or Latinas/os were observed in everyday discourse at Whitebread. This, however, does not mean that no such stereotypes exist. Consider the “Huxtable exception” for example. In their content analysis of prime time television, Entman and Rojecki (2000) discuss ways in which Cliff Huxtable of *The Cosby Show*, played by Bill Cosby, personifies a black exemplar that is successful because he has symbolically “become white.” Though the Huxtable exception is a black stereotype that exists, it is important to note that it counters normative blackness and is unrepresentative of the group.
9. Concepts espoused in Blumer’s synthesis of a macro and micro model parallel components of Bourdieu’s (1984:170) notion of “habitus” and Giddens’ (1984:2) concept “structuration.” Each addresses how individuals do not freely act independent from institutionalized patterns of recurrent behavior, but rather are constrained by these and often enact practices that sustain what Blumer ([1969] 1998) labels common definitions. It is through these routinization processes



that people not only express themselves but also teach and learn from others, and thus preserve status quos such as racial inequality.

## REFERENCES

- Allport, Gordon. 1958. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.
- Bell, Derrick. 1992. *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*. New York: Basic Books.
- Blumer, Harold. 1955. "Reflections on Theory of Race Relations." Pp. 3–21 in *Race Relations in World Perspective*, edited by A.W. Lind. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- . 1958. "Race Prejudice as Group Position." *Pacific Sociological Review* 1(1):3–7.
- . [1969] 1998. *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bobo, Lawrence D. and Michael P. Massagli. 2001. "Stereotypes and Urban Inequality." Pp. 89–162 in *Urban Inequality: Evidence from Four Cities*, edited by Alice O'Connor, Chris Tilly, and Lawrence Bobo. New York: Russell Sage.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2001. *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- . [2003] 2006. *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo and Tyrone Forman. 2000. "I am not a racist but . . . : Mapping White Students' Racial Ideology in the USA." *Discourse and Society* 11:50–85.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, Carla Goar, and David G. Embrick. 2006. "When Whites Flock Together: The Social Psychology of White Habitus." *Critical Sociology* 32(2–3):229–53.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. "Symbolic Power." Pp. 112–19 in *Identity and Structure: Issues in the Sociology of Education*, edited by Denis Gleeson. Driffield: Nafferton Books.
- . 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bustamante, Jorge A. 1972. "The 'Wetback' as Deviant: An Application of Labeling Theory." *American Journal of Sociology* 77(4):706–18.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. [1990] 2010. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 3rd ed. New York: Routledge.
- Delgado, Richard. 1982. "Words that Wound: A Tort Action for Racial Insults, Epithets, and Name-Calling." *Harvard Civil Rights–Civil Liberties Review* 17:133–81.
- Denzin, Norman K. 1992. *Symbolic Interaction and Cultural Studies*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Doane, Ashley, Jr. 1996. "Contested Terrain: Negotiating Racial Understandings in Public Discourse." *Humanity and Society* 20:32–51.
- . 1997. "Dominant Group Identity in the United States: The Role of 'Hidden' Ethnicity in Intergroup Relations." *Sociological Quarterly* 38:375–97.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. [1935] 1992. *Black Reconstruction in America, 1868–1963, with an Introduction by David Levering Lewis*. New York: Atheneum.
- Eliasoph, Nina. 1999. "'Everyday Racism' in a Culture of Political Avoidance: Civil Society, Speech, and Taboo." *Social Problems* 46(4):479–502.
- Entman, Robert M. and Andrew Rojecki. 2000. *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Farough, Steven D. 2004. "The Social Geographies of White Masculinities." *Critical Sociology* 30(2):241–64.
- Feagin, Joe R. 2010. *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*. New York: Routledge.

- . 2006. *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression*. New York: Routledge.
- Gallagher, Charles A. 2003. "Miscounting Race: Explaining Whites' Misperceptions of Racial Group Size." *Sociological Perspectives* 46(3):381–96.
- García, Juan Ramon. 1980. *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1984. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Goad, Jim. 1997. *The Redneck Manifesto. America's Scapegoats: How We Got That Way and Why We're Not Going to Take It Anymore*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Goldberg, David T. 2002. *The Racial State*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Hamilton, Charles V. 1968. "Race and Education: A Search for Legitimacy." *Harvard Educational Review* 38(4):669–84.
- Hartigan, John, Jr. 1999. *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- . 2003. "Who are These White People?: 'Rednecks,' 'Hillbillies,' and 'White Trash' as Marked Racial Subjects." Pp. 95–112 in *Whiteout: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, edited by Ashley Doane, Jr. and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. New York: Routledge.
- Henderson, Anita. 2003. "What's in a Slur?" *American Speech* 78(1):52–74.
- Henricks, Kasey. 2011. "The Soft Material Significance of Race: An Examination of White Stereotypes." *Sociological Insight* 3:146–68.
- Houts Picca, Leslie and Joe R. Feagin. 2007. *Two-Faced Racism: White in the Backstage and Frontstage*. New York: Routledge.
- Jacobson, Matthew. 1998. *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jackman, Mary R. 1994. *Velvet Glove: Paternalism and Conflict in Gender, Class, and Race Relations*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kennedy, Randall. 2002. *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*. New York: Vintage.
- Lawrence, Charles R., III. 1990. "If He Hollers Let Him Go: Regulating Racist Speech on Campus." *Duke Law Journal* 3:431–83.
- Lewis, Amanda E. 2004. "What Group?' Studying Whites and Whiteness in the Era of 'Color-Blindness'." *Sociological Theory* 22(4):623–46.
- Lippmann, Walter. 1922. *Public Opinion*. New York: Harcourt Press.
- McDermott, Monica. 2006. *Working-class White: The Making and Unmaking of Race Relations*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- McIntosh, Peggy. [1988] 2007. "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." Pp. 177–82 in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*. 7th ed., edited by Paula S. Rothenberg. New York: Worth Publishers.
- McKinney, Karyn D. 2005. *Being White: Stories of Race and Racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Middleton, Phillip. 1999. "Purposeful Venom Revisited." Pp. 91–93 in *Journey Towards Nationalism: The Implications of Race and Racism*, edited by Gerald E. Matthews. New York: Farber.
- Morrison, Toni. 1992. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Myers, Kristen A. 2005. *Racetalk: Racism Hiding in Plain Sight*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Parks, Gregory S. and Shayne E. Jones. 2008. "'Nigger': A Critical Race Realist Analysis of the N-Word within Hate Crimes Law." *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 98(4):1305–52.
- Potter, Jonathan and Margaret Wetherell. 1987. *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behavior*. London: Sage Publishers.

- Roediger, David R. 2002. *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 1994. *Toward the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History*. New York: Verso.
- Rubin, Lillian B. 1994. *Families on the Faultline: America's Working Class Speaks about the Family, the Economy, Race, and Ethnicity*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Schwalbe, Michael. 2001. *The Sociologically Examined Life: Pieces of the Conversation*. London: Mayfield.
- Tatum, Beverly Daniel. 2007. *Can We Talk About Race? And Other Conversations in an Era of School Resegregation*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Twine, France Winddance and Jonathan W. Warren. 2000. *Racing Research, Researching Race: Methodological Dilemmas in Critical Race Studies*. New York: New York University Press.
- Wray, Matt. 2006. *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

### ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR(S)

**Dr. David G. Embrick** is an Associate Professor in the Sociology Department at Loyola University-Chicago. He received his Ph.D. from Texas A&M University in 2006. He is a former American Sociological Association Minority Fellow is the current Chair of the Society for the Study of Social Problem's Racial/Ethnic Minorities Division, as well as the Vice-President of Publications for the Association of Humanist Sociology and the Vice-President of the Southwestern Sociological Association. His publication has centered largely on the issue of the impact of contemporary forms of racism on people of color. While most of his research is specific to inequalities in the business world, he has published on race and education, the impact of schools-welfare-and prisons on people of color, and issues of sex discrimination.

**Kasey Henricks** is a Ph.D. Student of Sociology at Loyola University Chicago. His research interests lie in the areas of critical race studies, stratification, and fiscal sociology, and his work has been featured in journals such as *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *Critical Sociology*, and *Understanding and Dismantling Privilege*. Contact can be directed to him at [khenricks@luc.edu](mailto:khenricks@luc.edu).