

The War on Drugs, Racial Meanings, and Structural Racism: A Holistic and Reproductive Approach

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ABSTRACT. The War on Drugs in the United States has been part of a system of social control targeting low-income black and Latinx communities. While this statement has been contested, its validity is clear from an encompassing framework that considers the history of racially motivated laws and practices and moral panics among whites who have blamed drug-related social problems and crime on marginalized racial groups. We develop a holistic and reproductive approach to understanding racial oppression by analyzing racial meanings and structural racism related to the War on Drugs. To uncover structural racism, we propose a framework that captures the relationship between drug policies and enforcement practices, racialized mass incarceration, the distribution of resources, and the reproduction of racial oppression in the United States. To examine racial meanings, we present findings from an in-depth content analysis

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of newspaper articles and digital media discussing the War on Drugs. Based on over 30 years of news content—394 op-eds, letters to the editor, and news articles and 3,145 comments drawn from the comments sections of online news articles—we argue that criminal justice practices and the distribution of racial meanings through the media act as racialized structuring mechanisms. We demonstrate how those mechanisms work in tandem to strengthen and naturalize the connection between racial groups and unequal social positions. We uncover how dominant racial meanings act as symbolic resources that maintain forms of structural racism such as the War on Drugs. Finally, we discuss the benefits of our approach and suggest relevant and necessary future research and practices.

Introduction

Drug law enforcement strategies in the United States center on the use of violence, force, and imprisonment and contribute to racial oppression. The earliest U.S. drug laws were tied to racist stereotypes and to fears about the negative habits of immigrants. This connection between racism and drug prohibition has continued since the 19th century. Despite common misconceptions that associate drug crimes with low-income communities of color, “for the last twenty years . . . whites have engaged in drug offenses at rates higher than blacks” (Fellner 2009: 266). However, the War on Drugs has largely targeted black and Latinx communities (Beckett, Nyrop, and Pfingst 2006).

While the term “War on Drugs” originates from a 1972 speech by President Nixon, drug policy enforcement formally took on the character of a war in the 1980s (Suddath 2009; Alexander 2012). The 1981 Military Cooperation with Law Enforcement Act, signed by President Reagan, enabled police to carry out domestic military operations and access military weaponry, equipment, training, and intelligence (Balko 2013). The U.S. military and the Pentagon provided military equipment to police departments across the country to fight the so-called drug war in America’s streets (Balko 2013) (see Figure 3.) The use of SWAT teams to enforce drug warrants at homes and even schools became shockingly common (see Figure 4.) During these raids, “police blast into

people's homes, typically in the middle of the night, throwing grenades, shouting, and pointing guns and rifles at anyone inside, often including small children" (Alexander 2012: 75).

The policing style encouraged by the War on Drugs has increased police violence in black communities (Cooper 2015). It has also been accompanied by "racial profiling, psychological intimidation, harassment of citizens, pretextual stops for trivial infractions, and selective enforcement of the law" (Meads 2016: 636). It also exacerbates racialized mass incarceration, contributing to the United States holding the largest prison population per capita in the world, largely comprised of black and Latinx people (National Research Council 2014). The 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, signed by President Clinton, allowed the War on Drugs to take more prisoners of color away from their families and communities (Johnson 2014). For instance, those convicted of a "serious violent felony" in federal court who have "two or more previous convictions in federal or state courts, at least one of which is a 'serious violent felony' (the other offense may be a serious drug offense)" received a life sentence (FindLaw 2013).

In short, the War on Drugs contributes to a racialized system of social control (Provine 2007; Alexander 2012). This system stigmatizes and harms already marginalized racial groups and helps maintain racial inequality (Coates 2003; Rios 2013).

The defenders and enforcers of U.S. drug policy routinely deny that it is being implemented with any intent to harm or control specific racial or social groups. In print, these laws and practices appear ostensibly racially neutral. Police training, guidelines for sentencing, and other rules generally do not overtly state that black and Latinx communities and individuals should be unfairly targeted. Yet, that is the practical reality of drug law enforcement and incarceration. Empirical evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates blacks are targeted for arrest and punishment in disproportion to their actions relative to whites. However, many politicians, legal authorities, members of the public, and even criminologists fail to identify racial prejudice and discrimination as systemic factors in criminal justice. Discussions around drug policy and criminal justice often hinge upon assumptions that rates of arrest and incarceration are a straightforward product of individual choices to engage in criminal behavior or that these systems are inherently fair

and just. Demystifying these “common-sense” ideas that many people hold and transforming the policies and practices of the War on Drugs are vital aspects of combating racial oppression in U.S. society.

A growing body of research now critically examines the racialization and expansion of the American criminal justice system and its social ramifications (Garland 2001; Davis 2003; Pager 2007; Haney López 2007, 2011; Brewer and Heitzeg 2008; Rios 2011; Alexander 2012). Social scientists have demonstrated and catalogued the detrimental effects of policing and incarceration for families and communities (Meyers and Wilkins 2002; Pattillo, Weiman, and Western 2006; Braman 2007; Clear 2007; Wakefield and Wildeman 2013). Moreover, scholars have examined the impact of policy changes in recent decades on select communities of color such as the deregulation and removal of safeguards from free-market economies, a renewed emphasis on punishment in the criminal justice system (police, courts, and prisons), and the maintenance of extreme segregation and poverty (Wacquant 2001, 2009, 2010). These macro-level and larger structural analyses have uncovered the impacts of many practices, laws, and trends. However, middle-range sociological theories addressing criminal justice practices, the role of mass cultural production, and the consequences for the reproduction of racial inequality remain underdeveloped. Toward this end, we develop a framework for analyzing these issues to reveal insights about the operations of racial oppression in American society.

In this study, we focus on the role of racialized and militarized drug enforcement policies and practices, known as the War on Drugs, in the maintenance of racial oppression in the United States. We propose a holistic and reproductive approach to structural racism by bringing to light the consequences of the War on Drugs (hereafter, WOD) and racialized mass incarceration on communities and families and the associated dominant racial meanings. Practices related to the WOD—militarized policing, dominant ways of thinking and talking about race and racism, and an emphasis on incarceration—significantly shape (and reproduce) racial inequality through the distribution of social, economic, cultural, and symbolic resources. Racial meanings in mass and digital media buttress racial oppression by helping to distribute symbolic resources (or *racialized symbolic capital*) that are used for identity construction and ideology. We apply our analysis of these practices

and meanings to data culled from both newspaper and digital WOD-related discourse. We show how criminal justice practices and meso-level racial ideologies legitimize and reproduce an unequal racialized social order.

A Holistic and Reproductive Approach

Social theorists such as Giddens (1993) and Bourdieu (1990) have long argued that social practices (habitual social actions) collectively reproduce the structure of society. Institutional practices (social practices organized within the body of an institution) are particularly powerful in social reproduction. The consequences of social and institutional practices spread over space and time and structure social relations (Giddens 1993). According to Bourdieu (1985, 1986), one's position in the social structure is contingent upon which types of "capital" one holds and controls: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. Economic capital consists of financial resources and material assets. Social capital consists of access to resource-rich social networks. Cultural capital consists of knowledge, preferences, and practices denoting dominant social position. Finally, symbolic capital consists of recognition by others based on authority, prestige, respect, and honor. These types of resources are like financial capital in that they are fungible. The possession of these varied types of capital, then, is mutually related to social positioning.

Structural approaches to understanding racism demonstrate the durable link between racial categories, racist social arrangements and practices, and positioning within the American social order (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Feagin 2001; Glenn 2015; Omi and Winant 1994). Moreover, sociologists have begun to explore the formal and informal social processes that reproduce the relationship between racial groups and the forms of capital in several contexts and to theorize racism as an ongoing multi-level social process (Young 2004; Lareau 2003; Embrick and Henricks 2013; Desmond and Emirbayer 2015; Byng 2013; Hughey 2015). In this article, we build on these frameworks to better understand structural racism and racial meanings.

While we do not suggest that our argument explains the entirety of the social reproduction of racial inequality, by highlighting the distribution of resources and the impacts of certain institutions, we show how

structural racism and racial meanings impact communities and families and maintain racial inequality. Social inequality is produced when the distribution of resources is systematically skewed towards certain groups of people and away from others via laws, institutions, and social norms (Schwalbe 2008). Racial inequality persists in prestige, power, wealth, education, and even access to social networks (Feagin 2006; Bonilla-Silva 2014). Using the racial meanings and structures related to the WOD as a case study, we provide insights into the durability of racial oppression and the process that sustains racial inequality across time and space. We also recast the racial meanings and structures of WOD as potential spaces of conflict and social change.

Feagin (2009) argues that racial oppression is reproduced over generations via the sharing and cultivation of a racial schema (the “white racial frame”) that permeates daily life and social institutions. Criminal justice practitioners and policymakers are disproportionately white (Robinson 2000). The devastating consequences of criminal justice practices disproportionately correspond to subaltern categories of race and socioeconomic status, with unique effects for families and communities of color (Petit and Western 2004; Human Rights Watch 2008; Warde 2013). Those affected by the contemporary WOD increasingly include whites, due in part to the “methamphetamine epidemic” (Linnemann and Kurz 2013). Nevertheless, drug policy enforcement and the criminal justice system remain largely racialized (Povine 2007; Rosino 2018).

Though the WOD is not the sole driver of racialized mass incarceration, it nonetheless represents one major pathway through which hyper-incarceration and the policing of low-income communities of color operate (Povine 2007). As noted by Haney López (2011), the criminal justice system is a mechanism of structural racism. Along similar lines, Povine (2007) argues the policies and practices of the WOD constitute institutional racism. However, the institutional practices of the WOD and its contribution to racialized mass incarceration deserve further analysis through a theoretical lens of racialized social reproduction.

By “racialized social reproduction” we mean a set of both ideas (dominant meanings) and practices (dominant structures) that rationalize, justify, and normalize racism and racial inequality. Dominant

meanings about race are the “common-sense” beliefs that people hold about different peoples. Racial meanings help to create the groups we recognize as “racial.” They also posit that some racial groups are kinder, more moral, more intelligent, or stronger than other racial groups. Those beliefs allow people to naturalize, legitimize, or rationalize the unequal racialized social system. Within everyday life and cultural representations, those meanings endow dominant racial group members with a specific type of symbolic resource we call *racialized symbolic capital*—respect, honor, prestige, authority, or legitimacy—and they restrict oppressed racial groups from access to this resource (Weiß 2010; Desmond and Emirbayer 2015). But racialized social reproduction does not depend only upon a set of beliefs and illusions we pretend are real.

“Race” and “racism” are not purely ideological; they have material causes and consequences, too. Differential outcomes by race are also the result of how different racial groups are formed and reformed in relation to various resources. Such structures—networks of relationships among people and the distribution of socially meaningful resources and of people within those relationships—are racialized. The unequal placement of different racial groups organizes our political, economic, religious, and social institutions (Bonilla-Silva 1997). Both meanings and structure are important in understanding race and racism as causes and consequences of human behavior (Omi and Winant 2014). Racial segregation and inequality are the consequence of, and help to reproduce, interpretations and redistributions of resources along racial lines. Meaning and structure always intertwine and are mutually constitutive of one another.

The criminal justice system is an institutional extension of the state (or government). In the United States, the state is racialized, an overwhelmingly and disproportionately white institution, an instrument of powerful interests, and a fundamentally racist institution (Bracey 2014). The state is also the sole legitimate possessor of the moral capital to use physical force, and it has a large amount of economic, cultural/informational, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1994). Hence, the state can use physical force, including violence, as a means of controlling populations in ways that are generally regarded as legitimate (Weber 1946). The state’s sole possession of the legitimate use of physical force

manifests domestically in criminal justice practices (Rosino 2016). Criminal justice practices involve a transformation of the economic, cultural/informational, and symbolic capital of the state into the moral capital to use physical force and vice-versa—a kind of “social alchemy” (Bourdieu 1994). The practices of the criminal justice system impact the relative social position and access to resources held by racial groups.

One of the key locations of social reproduction is the family. Families are significant sites of social reproduction because they facilitate the transmission of capital between members (Bourdieu 1998). They do not exist in a void but rather exist within the environment of their surrounding communities. The holistic approach to studying black families, developed by Du Bois (1889), entails examining not only families themselves but also the social and material conditions of their communities that serve as an external source of resources and constraints (Hill 1993). Drawing on this approach, along with examining the dynamics of the reproduction of racial inequality across generations, it is necessary to consider how not only incarceration, but also policing and cultural production, affect families through the socio-geographic contexts provided by their communities (Clear 2007).

The aggregated family and community-level consequences of criminal justice practices strengthen the ongoing connection between race and the distribution of the forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic) that influence social positioning. These consequences constitute a process of racialized social reproduction. Social and institutional practices also often require legitimation and justification (Van Leeuwen 2008; Byng 2013). The War on Drugs has necessitated practices of not only policing and incarceration but also of the production of particular discourses about race, drugs, crime, and social control in sites such as mass media (Rosino 2018).

In this article, we develop understandings of the relationship between macro racial inequality (structural racism) and racial meanings. We propose a framework that captures the relationship between drug policies and enforcement practices, racialized mass incarceration, and the maintenance of racial oppression in the United States. We then present findings from an in-depth content analysis of newspapers and digital media discussing the War on Drugs. Drawing on our analysis, we demonstrate how the consequences of criminal justice practices and

the production of dominant racial ideologies and identities work in tandem to strengthen and naturalize the connection between racial groups and unequal social positions.

The War on Drugs as Structural Racism

The War on Drugs is a set of politico-legal discourses and state practices involving the use or threat of physical force, including militaristic policing and severe inflexible prison sentencing, in the supposed interest of enforcing drug prohibition laws, reducing drug use, and disrupting the drug trade (Rosino 2018). The state criminalizes substances deemed harmful under the guise of protecting citizens. However, the labeling of substances and classifying them as either beneficial or harmful is a site of symbolic and material struggle. For instance, originally manufactured as an analgesic, the United States now classifies heroin as a harmful and illegal drug lacking in medical benefits despite its continued medicinal application in the United Kingdom (Goode 2008). In short, whether the state classifies a substance as a harmful “drug” or beneficial “medicine” is the result of social and political processes (Becker 1963; Goode 2008).

Drug prohibition laws in the United States have historically reflected racialized moral panics—amplified fears about racial groups as threatening or dangerous. Through efforts to control drug use, whites have sought to marginalize or control subaltern racial groups by criminalizing their assumed drug of choice. During the 1870s and 1880s, opium bans motivated by racist fears about Chinese immigrants spread across the United States. In some states, whites were explicitly banned from opium dens (Fisher 2014). Four decades later, demands for a ban on alcohol production and consumption were strengthened by anti-Catholic sentiment and the anti-Semitism of groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. Racist beliefs also equated alcohol use by Mexican immigrants, Native Americans, and blacks with criminality (Cohen 2006; Provine 2007; Marni 2012; Gaytán 2014). Alcohol prohibition lasted from 1920 to 1933 as the first major drug prohibition at the federal level. In the 1930s, stereotypes and fears about Mexican migrant laborers, black men, jazz musicians, artists, and street criminals helped motivate the federal prohibition of cannabis (marijuana) (Provine 2007; Morgan 1981; Cohen 2006). These examples are particularly ironic, given that

illicit substances, such as cannabis, opiates, and cocaine, were less frequently used by people of color and primarily trafficked by whites during the early 20th century (Helmer and Vietorisz 1974; Galliher, Keys, and Elsner 1998).

In the racially segregated and stratified Jim Crow South in the 1940s and 1950s, politicians and the media demonized the “negro cocaine fiend” made violent by the drug, and thus drug prohibition became a tool for postbellum disenfranchisement (Dvorak 1999; Cohen 2006). In the 1960s, the state implemented drug laws and “tough on crime” policies as a tool for social control against progressive social movements, including the civil rights movement (Haney López 2007). In the 1970s, the development of the Drug Enforcement Agency intensified and militarized drug law enforcement practices, justifying wars overseas and a war on people of color at home (Hall and Coyne 2013). In the 1980s, racially biased sentencing guidelines and racialized moral panics around the “crack epidemic” further augmented and racialized drug penalties and the prison population (Dvorak 1999; Welch 2007; Haney López 2007; Hall and Coyne 2013).

According to Wacquant (2001), the U.S. prison system, populated through targeted incarceration and racialized police practices that are exemplified by the WOD, alongside the conditions of impoverished black communities, constitutes a contemporary form of racialized social control akin to chattel slavery or Jim Crow segregation. The largely equivalent rates of drug usage and extremely disparate rates of drug-related penalization between whites and nonwhites demonstrate the ongoing racialization of drug prohibition enforcement (Beckett, Nyrop, and Pfingst 2006; Human Rights Watch 2008). Whites are more likely to have ever tried cocaine and cannabis (marijuana) than blacks and about equally as likely to have ever used heroin (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2015). See Figures 1 and 2, which dramatically show the racial difference in drug use and arrests for drug use.

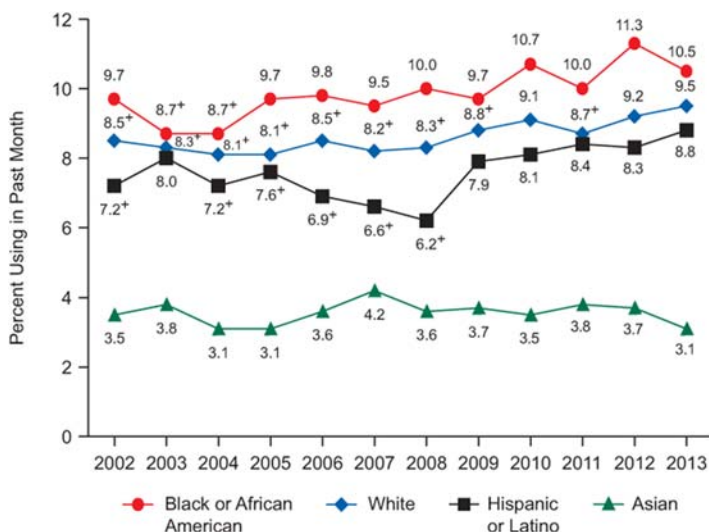
Mass media and informal networks generate symbolic and discursive connections between blackness and criminality and normalize racialized criminal justice practices (Wacquant 2001, 2009; Welch 2007). For racially isolated whites, particularly those who do not have contact with criminalized or imprisoned groups, mass media serve as primary sources of information about victims of the WOD, and that, in turn, influences

Figure 1

Drug use by race.

Black drug use is approximately comparable to white drug use, approximately 15 percent higher on average each year since 2002. The top line of the graph represents drug use by blacks, the second line by whites, the third and fourth lines by Latinx and Asian Americans.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2014).



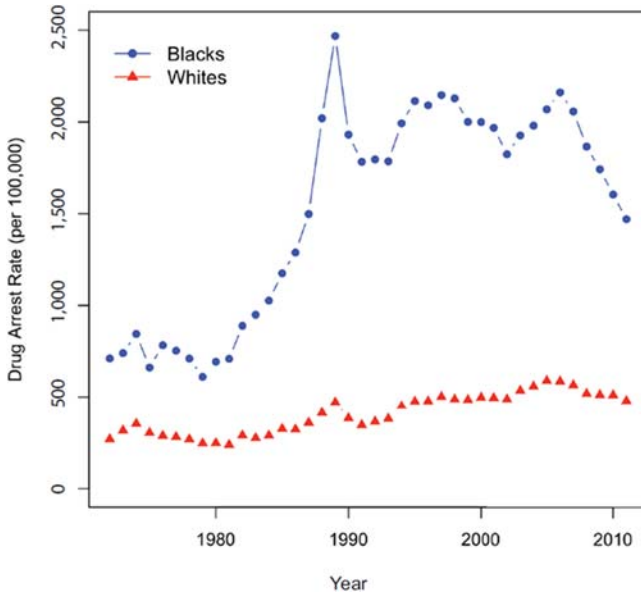
demand for harsh public policies (Entman and Rojecki 2001; Lancaster, et al. 2011; Tonry 2004; Cheliotis 2010). Racial fears and hostilities among whites continue to translate into support for punitive approaches to crime and support for “tough on crime” politicians. Those anxieties among whites also create false perceptions of drug users and distributors as primarily people of color, and those perceptions connect to support for punitive drug policies (Unnever and Cullen 2010; Smith 2004; Garland and Bumphus 2012). As Figures 1 and 2 show, rates of drug use between blacks and whites are extremely similar and yet rates of arrest for drugs are much higher for blacks than whites. The facts also contradict the common view that blacks are the primary drug dealers. The 2012 National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that white adolescents and young adults are 32 percent more likely than their black counterparts to deal drugs (Rothwell 2014).

Figure 2

Drug arrest rates by race.

Drug arrests are three to six times higher for blacks than for whites, far out of proportion to the slightly higher rates of drug use shown in Figure 1.

Source: U.S. National Research Council (2014: 61).



Laws and their enforcement are the products of enterprise and thus create interest groups driven to influence the state’s policies and practices (Becker 1963). Police departments, lobbyists, and prison corporations have an economic interest in punitive drug laws and high incarceration rates, which also provide a pool of exploitable labor to multinational corporations (Davis 2003; Saenz, et al. 2007; Brewer and Heitzeg 2008; Reiman and Leighton 2010). If the prison system routinely ensnared those with dominant group status, they would use their resources to avoid punishment and influence policy changes endangering the prison-industrial complex (Saenz, et al. 2007; Reiman and Leighton 2010; Wacquant 2010). So, the casualties and prisoners of the WOD

are disproportionately comprised of those who lack economic, cultural, and social capital: subaltern groups such as poor and working-class black and Latinx people.

Racial Oppression Over Space and Time

The holistic approach highlights that the WOD impacts families through its effects on their surrounding communities (Du Bois 1889). Due to segregation and racism, predominately white and predominately nonwhite communities are socially and economically isolated (Massey and Denton 1993; Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2007). This isolation has combined with historic racial inequality in the distribution of material and symbolic resources to generate greater wealth and prestige in white communities and greater poverty and stigma in nonwhite communities (Massey and Denton 1993; Lipsitz 2006). The dynamics of racial segregation allow for the targeted enforcement of punitive drug policies based on how racial and class demographics map onto geographic location.

The militant and punitive policing style encouraged by the WOD has increased police brutality against the residents of predominantly black communities (Cooper 2015). The WOD has moved “from a political slogan to an actual war” (Alexander 2012: 74). That has catalyzed destructive policing practices and a militarized policing mentality (see Figure 3.) American law enforcement officers receive military-style training on how to use physical and symbolic violence against an abstract adversary (Stoughton 2015).

As a result of racial profiling, the adversary is not abstract in reality. The American Civil Liberties Union (2018) defines the practice in the following manner:

“Racial profiling” refers to the discriminatory practice by law enforcement officials of targeting individuals for suspicion of crime based on the individual’s race, ethnicity, religion or national origin. . . . Any definition of racial profiling must include, in addition to racially or ethnically discriminatory acts, *discriminatory omissions* on the part of law enforcement as well. [Emphasis in original]

In other words, the underenforcement of drug laws against potential white offenders is a form of racial profiling. Through a variety of nonverbal

Figure 3

Militarization of the police.

In the United States, equipping police with military equipment has been an integral aspect of the War on Drugs.

Source: katesheets from United States (Police State) [CC BY 2.0 Creative Commons license] (Original title: Police State Pittsburgh G20)



cues and the influence of cultural imagery about crime on the public at large, the socialization of American police instills the mental image that the “adversary” is most often a black or Latino man (Welch 2007).

Negative police encounters, including racial profiling and mistreatment, are a salient aspect of life in many communities of color (Brunson 2007; Rios 2011). The militaristic policing practices of the WOD engender decreased trust in the legitimacy and intentions of police and the criminal justice system among people of color (Bobo and Thompson 2006; Pew Research Center 2012). Further, these practices amplify the perception of high crime rates in neighborhoods of color due to a combination of increased police surveillance and resistance to police

authority and domination (Emerson 2011; Rios 2011; King 2013). As Hall et al. (1978: 38) write: “The paradox is that the selectivity of police reaction to selected crimes almost certainly serves to increase their number (what is called a ‘deviancy amplification spiral’).” Rios (2011) points out that police in low-income urban communities often focus on surveilling, punishing, and arresting young black and Latino men, whom they perceive as de facto criminals and drug dealers, rather than protecting them from victimization and harm.

Criminal justice practices toward marginalized groups constitute one way the state attempts to manage and control populations beset by social and economic insecurity (Wacquant 2009). This practice can be seen in how predominantly black or white communities experience investment and disinvestment. Historically, economic investment has flowed toward predominantly white communities. Governments and other institutions continue to provide low-income communities of color with comparatively low rates of private and public infrastructure investment alongside high levels of investment in formal social control institutions such as policing and prisons (Meeks 2006; Wacquant 2008). Moreover, the criminal justice system often employs targeted and excessive fines and fees as a way of extracting financial resources from low-income communities of color to fund the expansion and militarization of police departments (Henricks and Harvey 2017). These institutions justify their practices by using the profit-returns-based logic of the market, by labeling certain neighborhoods as “bad investments,” and by pointing to extant rates of crime and poverty (Meeks 2006). Such racialized patterns of community investment constrain residents’ access to socially and economically valuable resources.

The WOD has precipitated racial/spatial barriers to economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. Employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, a major source of economic capital, are less accessible in many communities of color due to racially patterned investment and the impacts of mass incarceration (Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Wacquant 2008). Access to cultural capital through public schools in these communities also remains limited by educational disinvestment and by the punitive reach of policing into schools (Rios 2011). Social capital is severely constrained and hoarded by the rich and white, as closed networks built on racial and class hierarchies restrict access to their valuable connections (Massey and Denton 1993; Oliver and Shapiro 1995).

Figure 4

Invasiveness of the War on Drugs.

Police routinely enter houses by force in the War on Drugs, particularly in neighborhoods of people of color.

Source: West Midlands Police

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/legalcode> (Creative Commons license SA 2.0) Original title: Day 53 - Early morning drugs raid in Dudley



Additionally, blacks have limited access to symbolic capital because whites control the media and circulate the perception of communities of color as dangerous and dishonored spaces (as encapsulated in the contemporary racialized pejorative term “ghetto”) (Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2007; Hughey 2012).

While communities serve as an intermediary between policing practices and families, racial disparities in law enforcement and sentencing directly constrain access to capital for families of color through incarceration. The hyper-incarceration of people of color (primarily black men) reflects racial disparities in drug law enforcement, sentencing, and access to legal resources, and the overall harshness of drug penalties (Duke 2001; Bobo and Thompson 2006; Warde 2013). The criminal justice system is not only racially biased but racially bifurcated in the types of outcomes it produces. The racial background of an offender,

controlling for all else, influences the likelihood and severity of prison sentences and civil asset forfeiture and the likelihood of pretrial diversion or deferment to drug courts and counseling (Helms and Costanza 2009; Nicosia, McDonald and Arkes 2013; Schlesinger 2013). Due to racialized mass incarceration, black (and increasingly also Latinx) families are more likely than their white counterparts to face the incarceration of one or more members, which constrains access to different forms of capital (Warde 2013).

Research on the relationship between parental imprisonment and indicators of family well-being illustrates a process across generations that disadvantages families of color (Western et al. 2002; Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2001; Geller et al. 2009; Western and Wildeman 2009; Wildeman and Western 2010; Wakefield and Wildemen 2013). As noted by Massoglia and Warmer (2011: 855), such studies suggest a “need to think more broadly about the role of incarceration as an institution of stratification.” However, in taking a holistic and reproductive approach, we recognize that the problems faced by families of color are a consequence of constant external pressures, both economically and culturally, not internal failings. This approach avoids the racist logic employed by many scholars, most emblematically in Moynihan’s use of the “tangle of pathology,” which singles out black familial “dysfunction” as a primary cause of racial inequality (cf. Steinberg 1989, 1995).

Clear (2007:3) notes that imprisonment “produces the very social problems on which it feeds.” However, incarceration does not merely produce “social problems” or family dysfunction, it re-produces underlying social, economic, cultural, and symbolic constraints. Early conceptions of this criminological perspective, “social disorganization theory,” use circular logic. They propose that crime and deviant behavior are evidence of social disorganization and that social disorganization causes crime and deviant behavior (Winfrey and Abadinsky 2017). Moreover, they fail to examine the process whereby individuals become labeled as “criminals” by institutions and the impact of policing practices on crime rate statistics (Hall, et al. 1978; Rios 2007). Rose and Clear (1998) pose that “overpolicing” can amplify “social disorganization.” Although this represents an advance in criminological theory, it relies on a problematic concept that treats external causes of “dysfunction” as if they were self-generated.

Discrediting the notion of “social disorganization,” in-depth ethnographic research demonstrates that communities with lower access to resources often develop alternate forms of social organization that produce greater social organization and cohesion (Stack 1970; Sanchez-Jankowski 2008). However, the racialization and expansion of the criminal justice system remains a primary cause of downward social mobility among people of color (Saenz et al. 2007). The WOD and its contribution to racialized mass incarceration must be understood as more than an institution of state social control or a source of social problems. It is ultimately a mechanism of racialized social reproduction through its contribution to an ongoing connection between racial categories and the distribution of capital. In other words, the policing practices and incarceration related to the WOD help destroy access to valuable resources in poor black neighborhoods.

The acquisition of “mainstream” and legitimated cultural capital (practices and dispositions valued by the dominant class) is hindered by the segregation from society and the internalization of survival habits endemic to the “total institution” of prison (Goffman 1961). It is essential to note the influence of pre-imprisonment socialization (Schlosser 2012). Those who are most likely to be imprisoned already lack cultural capital (Saenz et al. 2007). Yet, prisoners commonly experience physical and symbolic violence, intimidation and coercion, constant surveillance, psychological trauma, unhygienic facilities, unhealthy and unsavory meals, lack of outside communication (a source of cultural capital), and strained access to education (a source of formal cultural capital) (Ross 2012). Dispositions and practices formed during imprisonment can differentiate ex-convicts from those formed in contexts marked by dominant social position. Incarceration affects the acquisition of formal cultural capital across generations via its effects on the educational attainment of the children of the imprisoned (Haskins 2014).

Incarceration impairs access to economic capital for families alongside the ability to distribute material resources to future generations. During imprisonment, one is removed entirely from the external labor force, resulting in a loss of potential family income (Wildeman and Western 2010). Prisoners are also exploited for labor within the prison system (Bewer and Heitzog 2008). Furthermore, imprisonment reduces

access to public assistance and the likelihood of future employment, especially for those who are black (Wacquant 2001; Pager 2007). Black men who have been incarcerated face slower wage growth and lower returns on previous work experience in comparison to incarcerated white men (Lyons and Pettit 2011). Those incarcerated for “street crimes” have worse economic outcomes after imprisonment than those convicted of “white-collar crimes” (Kerly and Copes 2004).

Resource-laden social networks remain difficult to maintain during and after imprisonment, resulting in a lack of social capital. Social capital does not simply describe social cohesion or connectedness but, more specifically, access to social networks that enable advancement in social position (Bourdieu 1984). Incarceration and aggressive policing decimate the available social capital within communities accessible to families and individuals (Rose and Clear 1998). Physical disenfranchisement and loss of social connection with the outside world constitute an immediate loss of social capital. Maintaining social contact with friends and family is one of the most difficult aspects of life faced by ex-convicts (Alexander 2012). Those who experience imprisonment may also experience a relegation to the separate social world of the marked “criminal,” as illustrated by the difficulties of societal reentry for prisoners (Travis 2005).

The social stigma of arrest, conviction, and incarceration for individuals and their families constitutes a negation of symbolic capital. Many view the mark of criminality as a “dishonorable” social status or, in the words of Goffman (1963), a “spoiled identity.” Link and Phalen (2014) propose a theory of “stigma power,” according to which stigmatization processes reflect and generate social relations of domination between the stigmatizer and the stigmatized. The stigma of conviction and incarceration reflects a negative state of prestige and generates a lack of authority that is structurally demobilizing. As blackness and criminality are discursively and symbolically linked in American culture, the stigma of subaltern racial status and the stigma of conviction and imprisonment combine in dually negating the symbolic capital of black ex-convicts (Winnick and Bodkin 2009). Prisoners are permanently inscribed with stigma, which can produce a sense of internalized shame shared by families (Braman 2007; Alexander 2012).

Altogether, the criminal justice practices of the WOD and its contribution to racialized mass incarceration disempower people of color in an astounding number of interconnected ways, reflecting overlapping social processes and the exchange of different types of capital. Racialized mass incarceration disproportionately and negatively affects the store of cultural, social, economic, and symbolic capital within many low-income black and Latinx families. Parents who lack access to capital cannot pass it on to their children. As illustrated by research on family stress and coping processes, families facing strain due to lack of internal resources often rely on the resources made available by their communities (Burr 1982). However, community-level access to the varied capitals has also been dispersed and constricted along racial lines by institutional practices related to the WOD and other forms of systemic racism.

While this framework helps synthesize previous findings and advance understandings of structural racism, we must also uncover the role of racial meanings in racialized social reproduction. We thus turn to our analysis of the public debate over the WOD in print and digital media.

Racial Meanings in the War on Drugs Debate

Methods

Against the backdrop of this structural approach to the WOD, we conducted a content analysis of over 30 years of U.S. newspaper content (1983–2014). We focused on the WOD in 394 op-eds, letters to the editor, and news articles identified by the LexisNexis newspaper database. The patterns demonstrate the role of racial meanings in the maintenance of structural racism. Our analysis of these newspaper manuscripts allows us to show how proponents and critics of racialized and contested social issues such as the WOD frame their arguments. In other words, it reveals what aspects of the WOD people tend to emphasize in news media representations. This research study identified both frames and the themes or “the recurring typical theses” within each frame (Altheide and Schneider 2013: 53).

We also analyzed 3,145 comments drawn from the comments sections of 24 online news articles from major news sources between

2009–2014 that discuss various aspects of the WOD. We analyzed comments similar to the newspaper manuscripts by employing “ethnographic content analysis,” which enabled us to find patterns of frames, themes, and discourses in the text (Altheide and Schneider 2013). Analyzing these online comments reveals how audiences respond to various arguments and stories about the WOD and how they interact with one another in these discussions. Through this analysis, we demonstrate how racial meanings are advanced, interpreted, and contested and how people form a sense of self, particularly their racial identity, in debates over policy issues tied to racial inequality such as the WOD (Rosino and Hughey 2017; Rosino 2018).

Findings and Discussion

To demonstrate the role of racial meanings, we highlight two important frames in how newspapers critiqued the WOD: functionalist and racial unfairness. These frames are significant because they represent the most and least common types of logic employed within the debate and because they were expressed in implicitly and explicitly racialized terms. (See Table 1.)

Making up about 52 percent of the total claims critical of the WOD, the functionalist frame was the most common. Early sociologists such as Emile Durkheim ([1893] 1984) and Talcott Parsons (1961) promoted the concept of “functionalism.” According to this logic, social institutions, such as the economy, criminal justice system, or the state, serve vital functions. In other words, they fulfill human needs. Moreover, this perspective suggests that institutions should facilitate social order and integration. If they fail in these purposes, social institutions are deemed dysfunctional. The functionalist frame thus argues that the WOD has failed to produce a lawful and orderly society and decrease social problems such as crime and drug misuse.

Many claims made with functionalist logic pointed out that alternative approaches or institutions such as drug treatment or counseling would yield more advantageous results. However, the most common theme—almost 35 percent of the claims within this frame—argued that

Table 1
 Frames and Themes in Newspaper Articles About the
 War on Drugs

Frame/Theme	N	%
Frame: Fiscal	103	15.12
Bad for economy/industry	10	9.7
Too expensive	93	90.3
Frame: Freedom and Justice	167	24.52
Social class	16	9.58
Human rights	25	14.97
Police militarization	9	5.39
Corruption/greed	29	17.37
Mass incarceration/overcrowding	47	28.14
Civil liberties	41	24.55
Frame: Functionalism	352	51.69
Failed/unwinnable	93	26.42
Doesn't reduce crime/drugs	125	35.51
Education	21	5.97
Treatment	65	18.47
Regulation	48	13.64
Frame: Racial Unfairness	59	8.66
Motivated by racism	5	8.47
Cause of racial inequality	10	16.95
Black community susceptible	8	13.56
Laws/policing are racially biased	36	61.02
Total	681	100.00

Source: Authors' database searches for years 1983 to 2014.

it fails to produce law and order and intensifies the problems of crime and drugs. Many commentators noted that making an activity a crime does not reduce its likelihood or availability:

Drugs are not going away, and putting more people in prison is not the answer. But if we continue to wage this War on Drugs, let's add alcohol to the list and level the playing field. Buy a beer and spend a year in jail. Do you think that would stop Americans from drinking beer? If you do,

you're living in a dream world. The same goes for the War on Drugs. (Johnston 2013)

This theme presents seemingly reasonable arguments about the WOD as a drug control strategy. It points out that this strategy either causes or fails to solve social problems. Yet, what Hurwitz and Peffley (2005) call “group-based frames” or “racialized code words” that imply racialized images of danger, threat, and violence—Mexican cartels, innercity, street, urban gangs, or Islamic terrorists—also permeated these claims:

The War on Drugs has created and enriched violent gangs from Colombia to our inner cities. . . . Drug smuggling is an assault on America, and get-tough indignation is a natural response. We are not arguing for giving free passes to foreign smugglers. However, we need a new strategy that will reduce the demand for drugs and improve the safety and well-being of vulnerable Americans. What most of us want is less crime and less profit for foreign drug lords and urban gangs, and help for families, friends and neighborhoods afflicted by drug abuse and addiction. (Anonymous-1 1996)

We have created some of the most dangerous criminals in the world by making the drug trade the gold rush of the past two generations. Street gangs all over the United States kill because of the drug wars. Many of the major cities have hospital emergency rooms that are overwhelmed with victims of gang warfare and drug overdoses. (Kevil 2009)

Whites commit most drug crimes, even disproportionately so (Case and Katz 1991; Fairlie 2002; Ingram 2014). However, the above claims suggest that immoral racialized and criminalized “others” associated with out-group races present the largest and most salient problem of the WOD. These claims implicitly rationalize the targeting of people of color as drug criminals by connecting the assumed dysfunction of marginalized racial groups to the dysfunction of the WOD. This logic, while used here to disparage the WOD, ironically reflects the racialized moral panics that white elites originally employed to generate it (Fellner 2009).

In contrast to the functionalist frame, the racial unfairness frame was the least common frame. This frame constituted less than 9 percent of the total claims criticizing the WOD. It focuses on the relationship

between the WOD and problems of racial prejudice, discrimination, inequality, and oppression. Over 60 percent of the claims made using this frame argued that the policies and practices of the WOD are racially biased. This was by far the most common theme among the racial unfairness frame. Statistics were a predominate aspect of this theme:

Largely because of the huge disparity in imprisonment for drug offenses, blacks are sent to prison at 8.2 times the rate of whites. Overall, one in 20 black men over the age of 18 is in a state or federal prison, compared to one in 180 white men. (Fletcher 2000)

As it happens, its unintended victims have been disproportionately black. The stunning rise in incarceration rates for black men began after the nation became serious about stamping out recreational drug use. (Tucker 2007)

Some newspaper articles pointed out that “the disparities are particularly striking” (Fletcher 2000). Others observed that “the statistics are alarming” (Rigelhaupt 2012). They then listed a series of ratios and percentages without thoroughly explaining the causes or implications of these statistics. As one article stated toward the end, after discussing a host of other critiques: “Moreover, there is an unacceptable racial bias in the enforcement of marijuana laws” (Anonymous-2 2014). Claims about racial bias were often briefly included as merely another issue among a catalogue of other problematic aspects of the WOD.

Claims that drugs, policing, and crime uniquely impact black communities (or communities of color more broadly) made up almost 14 percent of the racial unfairness frame. Many claims in this theme explained crime as a product of a strain caused by lack of legal opportunities for status and resources (Merton 1932). Nevertheless, this theme often depicted black drug criminals as pathological or immoral characters:

The attractive illegal livelihood relieves men of the need to develop skills that would provide stable legal incomes. To those who argue that there's a shortage of jobs for black men, he says that is refuted by the black immigrants who thrive in America. It is often said that because immigrants have a unique initiative or “pluck” in relocating to the United States in the first place, it is unfair to compare black Americans to them. However, the War on Drugs has made it impossible to see whether black

Americans would exhibit such “pluck” themselves if drug selling were not a tempting alternative. (Stossel 2011)

Not all narratives in this theme connected drug crime with communities of color. Others acknowledged that people of color do not commit most drug crimes but suggested that the features and activities of low-income, urban, predominantly black communities renders their inhabitants more susceptible to the criminal justice system:

Minorities especially suffer from the fact that inner-city drug dealers tend to congregate on the street, not indoors as in more affluent suburbs where the bulk of illegal substances is actually consumed. Because street-level dealing is so easy to spot (as television discovered long ago), police target it with “buy-bust” arrests that pump up their statistics and appease the public’s demand for action. . . . Similarly, no resident of Los Angeles doubts for a moment that police are more likely to make drug busts in Watts than in the Hollywood hills. (Marshall 1992)

These themes focus on racial implications of the WOD, but not from a holistic and reproductive perspective. Claims about the structural or systemic relationship between the WOD and racial inequality were scarce. For instance, claims that the racial attitudes of law enforcement and judicial personnel, including their animus and apathy toward people of color, motivate the WOD made up only 8 percent of claims within the racial unfairness frame. In fact, this theme only appeared five times in total. Several opinion pieces argued that support for the WOD was connected to racism rather than providing sensible solutions to drug problems. News articles only included these types of claims when quoting or summarizing prison or drug reform activists or people impacted by the WOD. The amplification of racialized fears and animus and their connection to the history and present of the WOD were emphasized:

President Richard Nixon was the first to use the phrase “war on drugs” in 1969. After Watergate, it was revealed his motives were purely political. . . . The war on drugs policy resulted in federal law that made substances like marijuana illegal This appealed to those “silent majority” voters who were angry about what they saw as drug orgies at events like Woodstock and who feared militant urban blacks with whom they associated drug use. (Anonymous-3 2010)

Another theme that highlighted how the WOD operates as structural racism identified it as a cause of racial inequality contributing almost 17 percent of the claims in the racial unfairness frame:

As you must know, the War on Drugs has been, in effect, a war on black men. Though whites are the nation's biggest users and dealers of illicit drugs, blacks are the ones most likely to be jailed for drug crimes and to suffer the disruption of families and communities that comes with it. (Pitts 2011)

It is important to note the overwhelming focus on racial bias in claims that highlighted the racially unfair implications of the WOD. Only mentioning bias via the existence of different outcomes for different racial groups provides an incomplete picture of how the WOD impacts society. The WOD reproduces racial inequality and holistically shapes and racializes communities, families, and individuals. It is not simply biased, but part of an ongoing societal process that maintains racially unequal distributions of symbolic and material resources. The WOD was depicted as a product of racial meanings or as a mechanism of structural racism by only 2 percent of claims within 30 years of newspaper coverage. Many participants in the debate over drug policy might never actually engage with the historical racialized moral panics that spurred the WOD, its role in maintaining racial oppression, and its holistic effects that contribute to racial inequality.

In other words, the reproductive and holistic perspective was not dominant or common even among those who opposed drug prohibition laws. Consider how a letter to the editor responded to an op-ed that argued the WOD targets black men:

Pitts was fine up to the point where he decided to pull out the race card. I have to disagree with him when he says that "the war on drugs has been, in effect, a war on black men." Please, let's stop having one group of people or another blaming others for misfortunes they have largely brought upon themselves. It is important for the young people of all races to stay in school, get a job and resist the gang life. In my view, people should learn to live their own lives without blaming everyone else for their circumstance. (Bernascone 2011)

The phrase "the race card" is often used to dismiss claims of racism or discrimination as unreasonable. Claims about the WOD that would

tie racial inequality to the social system were especially rare in the debate in newspapers. Doane (2006: 262) points out “clear lines of conflict between the ‘color-blind’ view of racism as prejudice or hate and the alternative view of racism as a more structural phenomenon embedded in American society.” The WOD was often critiqued in ways that avoided discussion of the structure of society and the maintenance of racial inequality. It is important to talk about racial disparities. But audiences of these newspapers could come to their own conclusions about the causes and meaning of those disparities. These claims about bias might suggest that it is a product of a few individually biased people or a naturally occurring phenomenon.

Important patterns in racial meanings can also be seen in our analysis of online comments. In the debate over the WOD in online comments, commenters often dismissed evidence of structural racism by depicting unequal racial outcomes as either legitimate or natural. Many in the audience interpreted empirical and anecdotal evidence of structural racism in the WOD, the criminal justice system, and society at large as products of the assumed cultural pathology, inherent criminality, and racial inferiority of impacted groups. Racist claims about biological or genetic group differences have lost influence and so essentialist claims about cultural differences have emerged as a dominant way of rationalizing racial inequality (Steinberg 1989). For instance, in response to an article pointing out the racial bias of the WOD, a commenter with the name Bad Company (2013) suggested that the headline should instead read: “Lots of Black People Sell’n Dope, Lots of Black People In Prison.”

These racial meanings are not new. Oscar Lewis (1966) argued that even when structural changes produce new opportunities, ethnic groups sometimes develop a pathological subculture that prevents upward social mobility. Later versions of the same concept used the language of an “underclass” to describe groups assumed to have permanent social pathologies (Gans 1996). Similar ideas were often used within the WOD debate to explain the differential criminalization of black and Latinx people as a product of assumed dysfunctional values and practices. One commenter named IndependentView (2013) rejected the idea that structural factors influence racial differences in the rate of drug-related arrests and incarceration by stating “It’s behavior.

Period.” Another argued against the causal power of structural racism by listing racist stereotypes about black communities and families and then claiming a “disparity in the CULTURAL systems” was responsible for racial disparities in arrests and incarceration (radiomankc 2013). In other words, many claims in the debate employed the logic of victim blaming or “justifying inequality by finding defects in the victims of inequality” (Ryan 1976: xiii).

Many comments in response to claims of racial oppression employed narratives about cultural values via families. One commenter argued, “75 percent of the black men in federal prisons come from single parent homes mainly headed by women. Solve this problem and many of our social ills will resolve.” These claims about differences in patterns of family formation echo a 1965 U.S. Department of Labor report titled “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” The report included some statistical data on the characteristics of black families and proposed that the structure of “the Negro family” was inherently dysfunctional. Moynihan (1965: 47), the report’s author, claimed that “the present tangle of pathology is capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world.” Much like the commenters who rely on decontextualized statistics and claims about family dysfunction to explain racially unequal outcomes in drug arrests and incarceration, Moynihan confuses the impacts of racial inequality with their sources and assumes that family formation takes place outside of historical, economic, social, or political contexts (Steinberg 1995: 2011).

Contrary to common assumptions about “family pathology,” a subculture with a high rate of male-headed nuclear families does not denote cultural superiority or higher functionality. Such families were only made commonplace by economic and social opportunities afforded to whites, including housing, community investment, and the construction of predominately white suburbs in the 1950’s and yet they began to be regarded as both “standard” and “ideal” (Coontz 1992; Greenbaum 2015). Over time, these types of family formations became increasingly misrecognized in mass culture as the cause of social mobility among previously working-class whites rather than a byproduct of it. The erroneous “cultural pathology” arguments popularized in the 1960s and deployed against advocates for racial justice continue to shape debates about racialized social issues such as the WOD.

The idea of personal responsibility provided another way for commenters to avoid acknowledging structural racism. Many comments echoed the sentiment “If you can’t do the time, don’t do the crime” (JoePhillie 2013). Others rejected or minimized the impact of racial discrimination in producing unequal outcomes. References to “terrorists,” “cartels,” “thugs,” and “street gangs” common in both data sets further equated people of color with dysfunction or pathology and even violence, crime, and threat. These shared racial meanings appeared in the commentary of both proponents and critics of the WOD. Even for critics, many connected their claims about the WOD to the protection of the white-dominated society from racialized threats and depicted people of color as dangerous and undeserving of empathy and social and economic investment.

Racial Meanings as Symbolic Resources

Ideology and identity are core sociological concepts that help explain how the construction of meaning reproduces racial inequality. They are aspects of the system of cultural representation tied to race and racism or forms of racial meaning. They allow people to interpret and define themselves and the social world as racially meaningful. Dominant racial meanings normalize whites’ collective interests. Whites can then rationalize their social position and legitimate their possession of valued resources (or forms of capital) as “natural.” In other words, such racial meanings concentrate white control of symbolic capital by equating prestige with whiteness and stigma with racial “others.” Throughout the WOD debate, as throughout other contestations over racial issues, people utilized dominant racial meanings as symbolic resources.

Ideologies are sets of ideas that enable people to justify social structures marked by inequality, group conflict, and oppression. The dominant racial ideology of an era consists of the ideas that are most commonly used to explain inequality between racial groups by justifying racial oppression and the practices that maintain it (Bonilla-Silva 1997). The social arrangements of a given society in a historical or contemporary period influence the dominant ideologies. Colorblind ideology is the contemporary dominant ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2014). It enables people to justify racial inequality while avoiding claims that are

stigmatized as overtly racist in the post-civil rights era. Using this ideology, people dismiss the continuing significance of racism against people of color and claim that ignoring issues of racial oppression is ideal. Colorblind ideology offers broad ideas and narratives for rationalizing and explaining the persistence of racial inequality. People use ideologies in specific ways depending on their context, such as discussing the practices, policies, and outcomes of the WOD.

Dominant racial ideology presents racial disparities in the outcomes of the WOD as rational, natural, or just. It stigmatizes and blames the victims in response to evidence or claims of racial oppression. Claims in the debate emphasized three frames of colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2014):

- (1) **cultural racism**, which explains unequal racialized social positions via the supposed cultural practices or values of racial groups;
- (2) **abstract liberalism**, which suggests that unequal racialized social positions reflect individual choice making and effort in the context of justice and freedom; and
- (3) **the minimization of racism**, which denies the existence of structural racism or downplays its impact on the production of racialized social positions.

People made claims about themselves, others, and society in the WOD debate. Dominant racial ideologies “enable people to understand and to accept their positions within a stratified society” by forming identities (A. Lewis 2004: 623). People identify with racialized subject-positions or “vantage points” within dominant racial ideologies (Hall 1997; Davies and Harré 1990). This identification provides a perspective from which they can view racialized social issues. When people form racialized identities in this way, they connect their stance on that issue to certain understandings of the meaning of racial categories and the characteristics of the people occupying those categories. In other words, they use racial meanings to form a sense of who they are in relation to others and the world.

The concept of cultural hegemony developed by Gramsci ([1929–1935] 1971) illuminates the relationship between the power held by

social groups in unequal societies and the dominant cultural values and norms. Mass culture, the shared culture produced by institutions such as the state and mass media, is shaped by dominant groups in ways that naturalize their positions of authority and present their interests and perspectives as normal or ideal (Lears 1985). Mass culture makes power arrangements seem inevitable or ordinary and so people often willingly consent to them (Lears 1985). This creates a general common-sense understanding of which activities, ideas, or social arrangements are normal, real, or ideal. Everyone becomes aware of these norms, even if they disagree with them. Similarly, in terms of *racialized symbolic capital*, people develop a general sense of which racial groups are honored or respected in a society and which are stigmatized or despised, as reflected in much of the discourse around racial groups in the WOD debate.

The ways people define themselves and others through racial identity construction also reflects how power relations shape cultural dynamics. Hegemonic whiteness is the dominant racial identity in the same way that colorblind ideology is the dominant racial ideology. Hegemonic whiteness describes a sense of what it means to be white—a sense that whiteness is both a naturally dominant social position and culturally normative state (A. Lewis 2004; Hughey 2012). Just as cultural hegemony produces a kind of common sense, hegemonic whiteness reflects commonly held meanings of whiteness that are taken for granted. For instance, whiteness was commonly associated by participants in the WOD debate with not only authority or legitimacy but inherent virtue. A commenter with the username Willi Dee (2013) wrote in response to a critique of racial oppression in the WOD: “How many white kids you know selling drugs out front of a liquor store? How many white kids are smuggling drugs across the border?” An impact of hegemonic whiteness is that a white youth caught for a drug crime may be perceived as a “good kid” who made a mistake, whereas a black youth under the same circumstances may be labeled as a criminal.

These dominant forms of racial identity idealize whiteness as normal, moral, innocent, pure, and connected to authority or, under certain circumstances, unfair victimhood. Hegemonic whiteness also defines “being white” in contrast with people of color and with whites who are viewed as falling short of this ideal (Hughey 2012). The claim by

Drew R. (2013), an Internet commenter, in response to evidence of the WOD as structural racism exemplifies this facet well: “Criminals tend not to understand the concept of delayed gratification and look for easy money. I get a kick out of people who make fun of white people because we’re boring or stiff and take school seriously, go to college and take that seriously, have two parents raising kids, obey the law, know the law, etc.”

Within this one example, we can identify several features of racial meanings. First, this passage reveals how dominant racial meanings allocate to whites symbolic capital, “a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honorability” (Bourdieu 1984: 291). Second, this quote allows us to understand how ideology and identity work together. The statement acts as ideology. It depicts the racial inequalities reproduced by the WOD as a product of the criminality implicitly ascribed to people of color. It also allows the speaker to engage in identity construction. It defines whiteness and the commenter’s sense of self as virtuous, lawful, and moral. It contrasts the speaker’s social identity to others outside of this category, whom it equates with criminal and immoral characteristics. In other words, this commenter identified with the subject-position produced by racial ideology. The process of identity construction (forming a racial sense of self) links to the function of ideology (justifying or rationalizing racial oppression) through racialized subject-positions.

As the comment above demonstrates, many statements from white participants that rationalized racial inequality also identified an implicit “we” or “me” with positive or neutral racial meanings connected to whiteness. Dominant racial meanings not only provide dominant group members with racialized symbolic capital but also a shared sense of comfort and continuity in the flow and meaning of their lived experience or what Giddens (1991) calls “ontological security.” Ontology relates to being or in this case what it means to *be* “white” or “nonwhite.” Many whites who participate in debates over racialized social issues such as the WOD are reliant upon these dominant racial meanings for their concept of how the social world operates and, indeed, their very sense of self.

Seeing racial meanings as symbolic resources allows us to understand major trends within the public debate over the WOD in mass

media. These trends include the high volume of claims around the threat and assumed dysfunction of the racialized victims of the WOD and the lack of claims pointing out that the WOD is a mechanism of structural racism. These dominant racial meanings are put into social practice via everyday speech and action, the construction and enforcement of public policies, and the organization of institutions comprising modes of structural racism such as the WOD.

Conclusion

The War on Drugs has been presented to the public in the United States as a set of “colorblind” policies and practices designed to limit the use and distribution of drugs. However, empirical evidence demonstrates the contrary. The practices and policies of the WOD have had uniquely negative effects on families and communities of color and thus exacerbated racial inequality. In short, the WOD operates as a form of structural racism. Toward this end, we have identified several key relationships between the practices of the criminal justice system, cultural production through institutions such as the media, and racial oppression over space and time. We have explained the shortcomings of previous approaches and highlighted the way the racialized distribution of resources—social, economic, cultural, and symbolic capital—helps reproduce and maintain racial oppression. Finally, via analysis of media and digital content produced in the public debate over the WOD, we illumine how dominant racial meanings, manifest in both racial identity and racial ideology, work as a symbolic resource that people marshal to form a sense of self and rationalize or misconstrue structural racism.

It is not enough to examine how policies and practices (such as WOD-related policing and incarceration) directly impact racial groups. Rather, we must also seek to clarify how dominant groups become tacitly invested in maintaining such unequal racial arrangements for their social positions and sense of self. The holistic and reproductive approach detailed in this article points to the strengths of examining racist institutional practices and their consequences in tandem with the ways that the public makes sense of those practices. As noted by Byng (2013: 709): “Race and racism are not only about stratification,

inequality, discrimination, and privilege; they are also about legitimating social policies and current social practices.” While dominant racial meanings serve multiple functions for individuals and groups, at the macrolevel, they often justify and enable particularly destructive institutional practices that produce arbitrary human suffering.

Sociological research can contribute to confronting racial oppression in domains such as the WOD and mass incarceration. It can show how colorblind racial discourse seeks to hide the ongoing racialization of cultural representations of drug use and crime. To change policies, we must first change language and public awareness. Unmasking dominant racial meanings that implicitly privilege whiteness as ideal or normative helps illuminate how racial oppression and inequality have persisted despite changes in mass culture and social institutions (Ray and Seamster 2016). Furthermore, there are practical benefits of paying attention to how racial inequality is reproduced and to the holistic impacts of structural racism. For instance, it helps agents of social change to identify ways of challenging dominant racial meanings and to mobilize for political and institutional changes that will redistribute cultural, economic, social, and symbolic resources in more equitable and just ways.

As the moral and legal standing of drug prohibition becomes increasingly subject to public debate and policy change, and the crisis of the expansion and racialization of the criminal justice system continues, analyzing mass media content and particularly its racial elements and implications will remain an important research task. Moreover, research should analyze the discourses of the practitioners of the criminal justice system and the representatives of the state on racial inequalities in the criminal justice system, especially in the post-Obama moment in which President Trump and Attorney General Sessions have begun a swift pivot away from reformist discourse toward the highly racialized Nixon-era rhetoric of “law and order.”

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