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Obscuring Oppression: Racism, Cissexism, and the Persistence of Social Inequality

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Abstract

This article outlines a generic process in the reproduction of inequality the authors name *obscuring oppression*. On the basis of 35 in-depth interviews with college students seeking to make sense of two contemporary social movements, Black Lives Matter and Transgender Bathroom Access, the authors demonstrate three ways people obscure (i.e., avoid, ignore, hide, or explain away claims of) oppression in response to minority protest: trusting the public (i.e., suggesting that an educated public would not allow inequalities to persist), appealing to order (i.e., arguing that if protesters followed the rules, society would be more welcoming to change), and dismissing oppression (i.e., framing movement claims as false or exaggerated). In conclusion, the authors argue that examining processes of obscuring oppression may provide insight into (1) the persistence of inequality in society, (2) linkages between color-blind racism and systemic patterns of sexism and cissexism in society, and (3) potential reactions to other social movements seeking justice for marginalized groups.

Keywords

social movement, transgender, race relations, prejudice, oppression

Ideologies are socially constructed patterns of meaning that people use to make sense of themselves, others, and the wider world (Blumer 1969).[1] Rather than immutable facts about the way the world is or was in some objective sense, ideologies are narratives or stories that people are told and tell one another (Goffman 1963) to guide their activities and maintain their beliefs (Scott and Lyman 1968). Ideologies are thus not static, but adaptable outcomes of ongoing processes of interpretation, reflection, and interaction (Berger and Luckmann 1966). As such, people face "crisis points" or "disruptions of faith" when the stories they believe are challenged by external social events (Connell 1987). In such cases, people may revise or maintain existing beliefs to make sense of new events and conflicts that call their assumptions into question.

Race and gender, as scholars have long noted (e.g., Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1989; hooks 1981), are interlocking systems of oppression predicated upon the reproduction of racist and sexist meanings. The creation, revision, and affirmation of racial and gendered ideologies in relation to societal shifts are parts of the processes whereby inequality is created and maintained over time (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Foucault 1971; Ridgeway 2011). The study of ideological maneuvering, or the ways people revise and/or maintain stories about "the way the world is and works" in the face of conflict (Wolkomir 2006), may reveal how people create and maintain large-scale patterns of oppression. At the same time, we may learn about

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processes of social change by studying such shifts in specific contexts to create typologies for further study.

What happens when, as part of their ideological maneuvering, people seek to make sense of conflicts in society that contradict their existing beliefs? How do they manage such dilemmas? We examine these questions through interviews about two contemporary social movements in the United States: the Black Lives Matter movement and the Transgender Bathroom Access movement. We analyze how college students, responding to challenges to systemic patterns of white (Hughey 2012) and cisgender (Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016) normativity, engaged in a process of ideological maneuvering we name *obscuring oppression*. We argue that this occurs when people seek to make sense of social problems by emphasizing assumed societal morality and progress in response to minority activism. Furthermore, we argue that obscuring oppression is a generic process—or a common way of accomplishing a shared goal intentionally or otherwise (Schwalbe et al. 2000)—in the reproduction of inequality that may be examined and tested in other settings and populations.

We offer a situated analysis of processes of ideological maneuvering in a racist and cissexist context.[2] The students at the heart of this study grew up in a context in which even talking about race is problematic (Collins 2005) and the latest transgender movement was in its infancy (Serano 2007). Rather than the overt racism of prior years, they came of age when color-blind, covert, and subtle tactics maintained patterns of white normativity (Bonilla-Silva 2003). By the same token, they live in a world in which transgender people increasingly advocate for rights instead of prior decades when institutional barriers kept most trans people hidden from society (Stryker 2008). As a result, they had little preparation for overt activism concerning race or gender as their social media feeds, televisions, and communities became filled with stories of black, transgender, and black trans people murdered in the streets and visible movements seeking justice for these populations. In response to these conditions, they sought to make sense of race and gender conflicts in relation to their existing beliefs.

Regardless of their own racial and ethnic, class, gender, sexual, and religious identifications, they made sense of both movements by appealing to dominant American ideologies in ways unlikely to have much impact on existing racism and cissexism in society. Specifically, when asked about the Black Lives Matter and Transgender Bathroom Access movements, they responded in one of three ways: (1) because no one would want inequality, awareness of inequalities was the only thing necessary to end them (trusting the public); (2) because change is inevitable, protesters simply needed to behave appropriately to gain support (appealing to order); or (3) because we have progressed so far from prior decades, there was not much to be upset about (dismissing oppression). In sum, they obscured the persistence and maintenance of oppression behind stated faith in the moral and progressive nature of America and a more positive creation of how America works in relation to race and gender, a process we call obscuring oppression.

Obscuring oppression represents an updated and integrated version of the following: "color-blind racism," or the ways people maintain racist patterns, meanings, and structural arrangements by appealing to existing norms, code words, and negative depictions of racial minorities without mentioning race explicitly (Bonilla-Silva 2003), and "benign sexism," or the ways people maintain sexist and cissexist patterns, meanings, and structural arrangements by appealing to gendered traditions, stereotypes, and assumptions about socially constructed distinctions between cisgender womanhood and manhood (Ridgeway 2011). In cases of color-blind racism and benign sexism, people combine individualist discourse with liberal assumptions about the exceptionalism of America and beliefs in inherent racial and gender differences. Although scholars often treat these as two separate axes of oppression, we demonstrate some ways that covert forms of both racism and cissexism may find voice in relation to racial and gendered others (also see Collins 2005). Furthermore, we outline similar patterns in scholarship that imply that this process takes place in other systems of oppression as well. We demonstrate that the ideological maneuvering of the "new racism" (Bonilla-Silva 2003) also provides the foundation for new forms of other systems of oppression.

Before outlining processes of obscuring oppression, it is important to note that this is a case study of a particular group in a specific social context. Rather than suggesting a specific operationalization of meaning, ideology, or other variables, we focus on outlining a typology from the ground up by drawing out patterns in the responses of everyday people to a current social concern. In so doing, our work sets a baseline for future operationalization and testing of processes of obscuring oppression in other settings and populations. We thus

explore the ways people "do things in a specific case" (Blumer 1969) to provide a theoretical tool for future research to explain and test how such efforts ultimately play out more broadly (also see Collins 2005). As such, it is not our intention to generalize our findings to the larger population.

METHOD AND ANALYSIS

Data for this study come from 35 in-depth interviews with college students attending a southeastern university. Students were recruited through snowball sampling wherein other students advertised the study to their friends and classmates. Participants only had to be current college students willing to talk about the Black Lives Matter and Transgender Bathroom Access movements to be eligible for inclusion in the study. Interviews took an unstructured form (Bonilla-Silva 2003) to allow respondents to "make sense of the issues *in situ*" and provide them with as much room as possible to consider the issues. As such, interviews began with the following prompt: "What is your impression of Black Lives Matter?" Then, respondents were probed with follow-up questions for the next hour. This exact process was repeated with Transgender Bathroom Access. Each interview lasted approximately two hours. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim for analysis.[3]

Our sample contains respondents of varied racial and ethnic, class, gender, sexual, and religious identities and represents a fairly close approximation of population estimates in the United States. Table 1 provides the demographics, and we give respondents pseudonyms for labeling purposes that may be found, with their specific demographics, in Table 2. In this way, our study extends much of the work on race and gender that often uses mostly homogenous samples (in terms of race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and/or religion), by demonstrating common practices across these locations that could be tested with larger samples and survey techniques. Also, at least two respondents in every sociodemographic location supported the movements, voiced support for the movements and criticized them, or opposed the movements. Furthermore, except in one case, respondents were congruent in their reactions to both movements.

Our analyses developed inductively (Kleinman 2007). Although we planned to focus separately on the Black Lives Matter movement and Transgender Bathroom Access movement, coding of the full data set revealed that many of the reactions to each involved similar effort. Recognizing these patterns, we went back through the data coding to identify common patterns in the ways they responded. We also analyzed inequalities literatures concerning race, gender, and their intersections and noted the ways our respondents spoke to patterns in these literatures. We organized the analyses around the common elements of overlap in the ways people make sense of race and gender inequalities.

RACISM, CISSEXISM, AND OBSCURING OPPRESSION

To contextualize the findings in this analysis, we first offer a brief sociohistorical discussion of the pathways of the Black Lives Matter and Transgender Bathroom Access movements. Although it is not possible within the space of one article to do so in any complete way, we focus here on important points in the past that direct attention to the current movements. Although each movement has operated separately and in collaboration (e.g., the Say Her Name campaign) in recent years and in the past, they share focus on access, justice, opportunity of minority groups, the promotion and dissemination of nonviolent activism, community building, and media messaging through local and broader networks. Both movements have used self-publication, group meetings, and, more recently, social media platforms to advance their goals.

As such, the Black Lives Matter movement is the latest manifestation of long-standing activism seeking social justice for people of color as well as a current, nonprofit organization predicated upon guiding principles (see Table 3) and advocating nonviolence, justice, and community through the use of both on-the-ground protest activity and a vibrant social media campaign. Likewise, the Transgender Bathroom Access movement is the current manifestation of both (1) the Transgender Civil Rights movement (see Schilt 2010, Serano 2007, and Stryker 2008 for timelines and examples from the broader movement) that especially became active in public policy and visibility in the 1990s advocating equality, justice, and the end of violence against trans people through on-the-ground and online messaging and (2) ongoing debates about racial and gendered public space, bathroom, and other accommodations and access dating back to the origins of the Jim Crow period and (cisgender) women's rights movements. With these things in mind, we offer a snapshot of patterns in American society over time that facilitate these movements individually and collectively as organized pursuits of racial and gender justice.

Table 1. Demographics and Beliefs about the Black Lives Matter and Transgender Bathroom Access Movements (*n* = 35).

Broad Demographic Category	Specific Demographic Identification	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Race/ethnicity	African American	4	11.4
	White	21	60.0
	Hispanic	5	14.3
	Asian	2	5.7
	Multiracial	3	8.6
Gender	Cisgender woman	21	60.0
	Cisgender man	14	40.0
Sexuality	Bi+	3	8.6
	Gay/lesbian	1	2.9
	Asexual	1	2.9
	Heterosexual	30	85.7
Social class	Lower	6	17.1
	Middle	24	68.6
	Upper	5	14.3
(Non)religion	Religious	17	48.6
	Nonreligious	17	48.6
	Spiritual but nonreligious	1	2.9
Beliefs about the Black Lives Matter movement	Pro	9	25.7
	Pro and against	15	42.9
	Against	11	31.4
Beliefs about the Transgender Bathroom Access movement	Pro	8	22.9
	Pro and against	15	42.9
	Against	12	34.3

Note: All demographics are taken from the self-identification respondents reported during the interviews.

To this end, we must first look backward to understand current situations (Collins 2005; Stryker 2008). Historically, American society has expressed ideological claims of liberty, justice, and the pursuit of happiness for all (Collins 2000). Because this ideology has never matched the empirical reality of the nation, obscuring oppression has always been a central, though generally unremarked by the masses, element of America. This is because no matter how comforting a given belief, empirical realities have a way of creeping into the lives of people and nations in ways that contradict established claims (Serano 2007). When this occurs, people invested in a meaning (i.e., "the land of opportunity," "liberty and justice for all," etc.) must either face the inaccuracy of their beliefs or find ways to situate the new information into their existing claims (Blumer 1969).

As scholars focused on black (Gates 2013) and transgender (Stryker 2008) history have shown, U.S. history is littered with examples of what we call obscuring oppression.[4] While these efforts have taken different forms at different times and played out in different ways within different populations, each case involves downplaying, dismissing, eradicating, silencing, enslaving, and/or incarcerating minorities whose very existence demonstrates the inaccuracy of American claims (Alexander 2012). Here, we focus on some of the forms of obscuring oppression suggested in histories of black and/or transgender experience, but as we discuss in the conclusion, similar analyses may be accomplished with other marginalized communities.[5]

Put simply, obscuring oppression reveals itself as a common pattern in America from the earliest days of the nation. In the late 1700s and continuing into the 1800s, for example, people of color were removed from daily life through genocide, exclusion, slavery, and wars instigated and maintained by U.S. elites with the cooperation of the citizenry (Gates 2013). At the same time, white supremacist depictions of these racial "others" and campaigns to eradicate and/or enslave them were often justified through what we would now call transphobic

Table 2. Demographics of Respondents Quoted in Analyses.

Pseudonym	Demographic Profile
Sondra	Nonreligious, African American, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender woman
Michael	Nonreligious, multiracial, middle-class, bisexual, cisgender man
Chad	Nonreligious, white, upper-class heterosexual, cisgender man
Lydia	Spiritual, white, working-class, heterosexual, cisgender woman
Elle	Christian, African American, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender woman
Vicki	Nonreligious, white, upper-class, bisexual cisgender woman
Claire	Spiritual but nonreligious, multiracial, middle-class, asexual, cisgender woman
Brian	Christian, white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender man
Daniel	Nonreligious, multiracial, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender man
Juan	Christian, Hispanic, upper-class, heterosexual, cisgender man
Nathan	Christian, white, working-class, heterosexual, cisgender man
Maria	Nonreligious, Hispanic, middle-class, bisexual, cisgender woman
Thomas	Catholic, Hispanic, working-class, heterosexual, cisgender man
Mark	Nonreligious, African American, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender man
Lisa	Christian, white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender woman
David	Christian, white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender man
Susan	Christian, white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender woman
Donny	Christian, white, upper-class, heterosexual, cisgender man
Lynn	Nonreligious, Asian, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender woman
Derek	Christian, white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender man
Le	Christian, Asian, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender woman
Matt	Nonreligious, white, working-class, heterosexual, cisgender man
Amelia	Religious, Hispanic, working-class, heterosexual, cisgender woman

Note: All demographics are taken from the self-identification respondents reported during the interviews. Only the 21 respondents who are quoted in the text are listed above; they are listed in the order they first appear in the text.

articulations of improper gendered natures among black people (Collins 2005) and anti-Christian gender fluidity within Native Nations (Blackwood 1986). In fact, many of these (cis)gender ideological constructions were used by white male doctors and politicians in the broader definition of people of color as biologically distinct from and inferior to whites (Collins 2005). Rather than explicitly identifying these efforts as oppression, elites used such tactics to define their actions as natural progress, science, and a divine mission received from god.

The U.S. Civil War and westward dominance over Native Nations in the latter part of the nineteenth century shifted the manner of oppression used to maintain white and cisgender-male supremacy in America (Gates 2013; Stryker 2008). Although racial and gender movements for emancipation and rights continued, most famously in the case of women seeking suffrage and people of color seeking suffrage and an end to lynching practices, structural racism and cissexism adapted to a segregation model following the fall of explicitly institutionalized enslavement, banishment, and warfare methods. For black people, this ushered in a century of Jim Crow (Alexander 2012) and Sundown Town (Loewen 2005) segregation wherein people of color were denied access to almost all white spaces, occupations, and opportunities. For people who would today likely identify as transgender, this manifested in sharply drawn distinctions between "healthy" absolute femininity and masculinity and "diseased, unnatural" fluidity (Stryker 2008). Black gender nonconformists (a more common phrase then) faced both systems operating in tandem (Rosenberg 2017). In these ways, oppression was hidden or obscured through spatial segregation that removed each population from the rest of society.

As Bonilla-Silva (2003) noted, however, systems of oppression are not clear-cut. As segregation took over as the primary form of domination, for example, white and "normal-sexed" people continued to use violence in cases in which oppressed minorities stepped out of "their place." In the case of black communities, we see illustrations of this through lynching campaigns, terror

Table 3. Guiding Principles of the Black Lives Matter Movement.

Principle	Description
Diversity	Acknowledge, respect, and celebrate differences and commonalities among people.
Restorative justice	Work for freedom and justice for Black people and, by extension, all people. Work should be restorative rather than depleting through the creation and nurturing of a beloved community.
Globalism	Recognize global Black community that varies in privilege and disadvantage.
Queer affirming	Foster a queer-affirming network and reject heteronormative thinking.
Unapologetically Black	Refusal to qualify the movement's position as a means of celebrating Blackness.
Collective value	Recognize the value and importance of all Black lives regardless of other identities.
Empathy	Empathetically learn about and connect with comrades in the struggle.
Loving engagement	Embody and practice justice, liberation, and peace when engaging with others.
Transgender affirming	Embrace and include transgender people in the movement and dismantle cissexism. Recognition of the disproportionate violence experienced by Black trans women.
Black villages	Embrace extended families and "villages" to care for one another, rejecting the Western conceptualization of the nuclear family.
Black women	Reject sexism, misogyny, and male-centeredness to affirm women in the movement.
Black families	Make movement spaces family-friendly to enable parents to fully participate with their children. This includes freeing mothers from the "double-shift" of private household work and participating in movement activities.
Intergenerational	Foster intergenerational and communal network that rejects ageism.

Source: "What We Believe" (https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/what-we-believe/).

campaigns run by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and regular murders of people of color by whites throughout the twentieth century. In the gender-nonconformist case, we see illustrations of such patterns in the harassment and murders of cross-dressers and "sex inverts" and the scientific redefinition of nonbinary sexes as diseases worthy of institutionalization. The 1900s also contain hundreds of examples of devastating medical experiments conducted on black people and individuals who would now identify as transgender (and intersex), predicated upon beliefs about the inferiority of these groups (Stryker 2008; Washington 2006).

Neither population was silent during these periods. Historical records reveal movements in the early 1900s and especially in the 1920s when these groups individually sought rights. More well known, however, are the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s when black people, some of whom were also sex and gender nonconformists (Rosenberg 2017), actively challenged segregation practices and rendered explicit, overt racism untenable. Similarly, gender nonconformists, alongside cisgender lesbian, bisexual, and gay individuals (many of whom were also people of color), led or participated in active protests across the United States in the 1950s and 1960s that culminated in the Stonewall protests in 1969 and continued as part of the Gay Liberation movement (Armstrong and Crage 2006). The combination of these efforts and other mass movements (e.g., women's liberation) ushered in what racial (Collins 2005) and gender (Ridgeway 2011) scholars refer to as a "new era" of racial and gender relations.

This "new era," however, did not eradicate the oppression of racial and gender others. Rather, the oppressive structures of the past again shifted into new forms of domination while elements of the past (i.e., violence and segregation) continued in more covert, subtle, and nuanced packages (Collins 2005). Reflecting on these patterns, researchers have suggested these more covert, or even more obscured, forms of oppression may be even more difficult to challenge than past forms (Bonilla-Silva 2003) because they use classic American ideals—individualism, free choice, progress—to suggest that oppression itself is over. In this way, they obscure ongoing patterns of inequality by

encouraging people to believe that everyone already has the same liberty and justice despite the lack of empirical support for such belief.

In this new era, for example, race and racism became things of the past, issues that civilized Americans do not talk about, and problems most whites do not see as worthy of attention. Within this new "post-racial" or "color-blind" system, the spatial concealment practices of the past became ideological concealment efforts that allow people to even more easily ignore the ongoing reproduction of past patterns (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Although advances were made for some people of color, racial disparities in health, housing, politics, education, and other inequalities persisted, and in some cases increased, throughout the past 40 years (for reviews, see Pager and Shepherd 2008; Reskin 2012; and Williams and Collins 1995). At the same time, this new form has been so effective that many Americans, especially white Americans, have difficulty seeing or even believing that racism continues to shape every aspect of America today.

We see a similar pattern in the transgender case. The conservative backlash, Reagan revolution, and rise of the religious right at the end of the 1970s rolled back gains by people of color and cisgender women and temporarily stopped lesbian and gay movements in their tracks (Fetner 2008). In addition, these shifts almost entirely eradicated recognition of the existence of people who would soon adopt the term *transgender* as part of the organization of the Transgender Civil Rights movements in the 1990s (Stryker 2008). Even liberal movements for racial minority, women's, and gay and lesbian rights dropped transgender activists from their retellings of prior protests and calls for justice in the 1980s (Rosenberg 2017; Stryker 2008), and even the most educated Americans, including sociologists, erected almost entirely cisgender constructions of reality, nature, and history (Connell 2010; Sumerau et al. 2016; Westbrook and Schilt 2014). As such, even the history of noncisgender existence became obscured in the discourses of the new era (Rosenberg 2017).

When we look at black and/or transgender communities today, we see nuanced similarities and differences. On one hand, both groups are heavily overrepresented in the criminal justice system (Alexander 2012; Meyer et al. forthcoming). Both groups also face systematic housing discrimination (Langowski et al. forthcoming; Reskin 2012) and murder and violence from police and others in public spaces (Cohen and Jackson 2016). On the other hand, although racial justice movements have effectively dismantled de jure racial segregation of public space (i.e., bathrooms, locker rooms, etc.) and gained at least limited visibility in science and media (Collins 2005), transgender activists currently fight against de jure sex and gender segregation of the same public spaces and are only beginning to gain at least some visibility in these same arenas (Stryker 2008). Although we could offer many other similarities and differences at the current moment of U.S. history, the point remains that these are two oppressed populations fighting against dominant norms that they have been challenging for centuries.

At the same time, both populations seek justice in a context in which most Americans, especially white and/or cisgender Americans, believe that oppression is a thing of the past and know very little about the histories of these groups. Especially because educational systems and materials rarely offer much racial or gender history (Loewen 1995), this context is not surprising, even though it represents a serious barrier. Considering that American media also tend to be heavily focused on white, male, monosexual (especially heterosexual-based), and cisgender experiences (Collins 2005), members of oppressed groups often learn about people like themselves only if they have the opportunity to go beyond mainstream artifacts in search of histories obscured in the service of dominant power structures (Foucault 1971). In fact, we intentionally only used easily accessible histories here, but because of prior experience, we would not be surprised if some of these observations are new for even some scholars (Stryker 2008). Processes of obscuring oppression, it would seem, offer fertile ground for sociological analyses.

To this end, in this article we examine how people obscure oppression in their reactions to overt movements for racial and gender justice. In the following sections, we show how respondents did this by reproducing beliefs in American exceptionalism: a moral public desiring liberty and justice for all and belief in ongoing American progress regardless of evidence to the contrary. First, those who voiced support for the movements (n = 9 for Black Lives Matter, n = 8 for Transgender Bathroom Access) *trusted the public* by arguing that public awareness was all that was needed to end racial and gender inequalities. Then, those who voiced support before then disagreeing with the methods used by activists (n = 15) *appealed to order* by arguing that if black and transgender people protested properly, things would change. Finally, those who voiced opposition to the movements (n = 11 against Black Lives Matter, n = 12 against Transgender Bathroom Access) *dismissed oppression* by arguing that activists' claims were false or exaggerated.

In conclusion, we draw out implications of these efforts for understanding the persistence of racial and gender inequalities in America.

TRUSTING THE PUBLIC

A hallmark of the current era includes the unwillingness of Americans to view others as explicitly racist (Bonilla-Silva 2003) or sexist (Pascoe and Hollander 2015). Rather, many contemporary Americans argue that such feelings and beliefs are a thing of the past, occasional lapses or jokes without any real political or social impact, or simply the product of ignorance or lack of awareness (for reviews, see Hughey, Embrick, and Doane 2015; Ridgeway 2011). Furthermore, contemporary Americans often react with shock, disgust, and defensive explanations when "one of their own" is caught in racist or sexist activities, statements, or practices, and seek to frame such events as things that "nice," "moral," or "real" Americans no longer do. In this section, we outline how *supporters* of the movements reproduced these patterns by arguing that if the public knew what was happening, things would change. In so doing, they trusted the public by assuming the public would, once alerted, wish to oppose racist and cissexist processes.

Although trusting the public, and by extension assuming others are good, moral citizens who care about justice and equality once properly educated, may be a comforting thought, this is something people of color, transgender people, and other marginalized groups rarely get to do (Collins 2005). Sociologists have documented many ways racial (Feagin 1991), gender (Logan 2015), and sexual (Adams 2011) minorities face daily onslaughts and marginalization in public spaces (also see West and Fenstermaker 1995). In addition, historical cases demonstrate that the public has never simply made things better upon learning about oppressive patterns in America without being pushed hard to do so (Gates 2013; Stryker 2008). In fact, researchers note that public awareness campaigns are more likely to make people feel better about existing inequalities than to change them in meaningful ways (King 2008). By trusting the public, people obscure the ongoing operation of oppressive structures by placing their faith or hope in the assumed morality and concern of others.

As the following excerpt from Sondra shows, supporters of Black Lives Matter saw the movement as an awareness campaign:

> It was started to get awareness out there with what is going on with the African American culture, and how we are being treated when it comes to police officers. People need to know officers are getting away with essentially murder.

Michael agreed: "It's about bringing to light the mistreatment of African-Americans across the U.S." Chad added, "It's trying to get people to be more aware of the discrimination we still have in today's society that didn't go away back in the day." Rather than emphasizing actions the movement took or changes the movement sought to make, supporters in our sample defined the Black Lives Matter movement as an effort to simply make people more aware of racism.

Supporters of the Transgender Bathroom Access movement, as illustrated by Sondra in the next excerpt, also suggested trans activists' efforts were about awareness: "The media scandalize it, and people just don't know any better or they would care." Chad concurred in this case, as well: "It makes a lot of people uncomfortable just because it is a new thing, a weird thing for them and that's the issue, it's basically just unknowingly discriminating is all." Lydia added,

> It's about awareness because people just don't know, they've never even met a transgender person and then they are probably terrified of them, it's the same with race, like, if you're not exposed to this stuff, then you're gonna form this division between you and them is all.

Rather than systematic transphobia or cissexism, supporters, as they did with racism, located the problem in (cisgender) people's lack of awareness of the issues. In so doing, supporters in both cases suggested the solution to these problems was simply to educate others.

Although the prior examples suggest that an educated or aware public would not let these inequalities continue, this claim became more explicit when supporters brought up historical examples of racism and sexism. As Michael put it,

> I think it's all about education, okay, people need to know better. I would definitely like to learn more about it in classes because we saw it in the Civil Rights movement, you know, people need to know about what's happening so they can change like back then. You know, because if we would have been there back then, we would have been involved, and so I think we need to know more about it and learn more about it in school.

Elle added, "People need to be educated that this is still an issue because the problem is people don't feel like discrimination exists anymore, but they would care more if they knew." Vicki added,

> They gotta bring to light all this information that we try not to talk about because people will stay silent about stuff until they see it in the news. But, when people see it, then things will change because, like in the past, people won't have it.

Supporters of transgender rights efforts also believed that educating the public was key. In reference to pending laws that would prohibit trans people from using the restroom that corresponds with their gender identity, Michael noted,

> I feel like, before these bills and stuff, it didn't really matter. It wasn't really talked about or brought to light, but with it brought to light, it's a recent thing, and people just have to get used to it, and learn from it.

Lydia agreed: "They should be able to use whatever bathroom, I mean, who cares? I don't think people's fear is genuine, but more just ignorance that needs to be corrected, you know, they need to be taught better." Echoing other supporters, Sondra added, "It's just ignorance is all. The more people scandalize it, the more fear they create, but if they had a conversation about it, it would be different." Claire summed up the consensus: "We just have to educate people on both of these [issues], people are better than this, but they don't know any better."

Overall, supporters of the movements suggested that awareness was the key to social change. Although these two aspects are often important in processes of change, historical and contemporary scholarship demonstrates that they are almost never enough to accomplish change on their own (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Collins 2005; King 2008). Rather than focusing on systemic patterns of inequality embedded within America, these respondents *obscure* oppression by trusting the public to simply move past inequalities once such patterns become apparent. In so doing, as noted in studies of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003) and benign sexism (Ridgeway 2011), they individually disapprove of inequality while leaving the structural and interpersonal patterns that facilitate oppression firmly in place.

APPEALING TO ORDER

Sociologists have long noted the importance of investigating how people create and maintain order (e.g., Berger and Luckmann 1966; Goffman 1959; Schwalbe et al. 2000). Key to these processes are human tendencies to structure all aspects of life into routine, repetitive patterns and rituals that allow them to navigate much of social life without consideration of mundane details and constant decision making (Goffman 1974). At the same time, researchers have long noted that broad patterns of inequality persist as repetitive, methodical routines wherein people signify and hold others accountable for signifying racial, classed, and gendered selfhood (West and Zimmerman 1987). Although all such patterns are established at some point and are always available to revision, they appear to many as "natural" or "necessary" mechanisms of social life (Ridgeway 2011).

Historically, however, the construction of social order has been a powerful tool in obscuring oppression (Foucault 1971). Because the "order of a things" at a given time and in a given context typically includes dominant ways of doing race, gender, and other social systems (West and Fenstermaker 1995), change typically arises from sustained, active disorder created by people explicitly challenging taken-for-granted assumptions, disrupting the daily routines of others able or willing to ignore existing social problems, and forcing others to react to these endeavors if they wish to restore order (Stryker, Owens, and White 2000). At the same time, people seeking to maintain social order may impugn such efforts by defining disruption itself as a problem (Collins 2005). In this section, we outline the ways people may accomplish this by voicing support for an issue while criticizing the methods whereby movements seek change. In doing so, they appeal to order to suggest that, if marginalized groups simply behave properly and be patient, then problems will go away over time.

To outline this process, we focus first on responses to Black Lives Matter specifically before turning to similar patterns in the responses to Transgender Bathroom Access. We do this because appealing to order may be seen as an extension and confirmation of color-blind patterns noted in previous scholarship (see, e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2003; Goss, Byrd, and Hughey 2017; Reskin 2012). The same way whites may voice support for racial equality while opposing concrete efforts to make such equality a reality (i.e., affirmative action,

busing and housing integration policies, universal health care, etc.), appealing to order involves voicing support for protesters while defining effective methods of protest as dangerous or morally wrong. This type of reasoning gives the impression of concern but stops short of supporting action that could change structural conditions and outcomes (Collins 2005). In such cases, people define both the issue and the solution as equally problematic, which effectively maintains the problem at the same time. The following excerpt from Brian offers a typical illustration of this type of reasoning:

> The issue is important, but it should be peaceful protest. You stay on the sidewalk, you know? You have your freedom of speech to say what you want to say in normal terms. That is fine and good, but do not go blocking the road so people can't get through; people don't have to listen to your protest. You have the right to speak, but people have the right not to care so don't block the road, don't throw shit at police officers who are there to protect you, stop ruining people's property. Protest in your own area, state your claim, go home and continue with your day. Don't interrupt someone else's life.

Daniel added,

> The issue is important, you know, but members of the movement haven't been conducting themselves very well, you know, some of them are blocking roads, airports, etc. If they want support, they shouldn't disrupt people's lives in that way.

In many cases, respondents, echoing Daniel and Brian, argued that the Black Lives Matter movement was important but then suggested that the methods of protest that often work—disrupting the lives of those seemingly unaffected by the issue (Collins 2000)—were problematic.

This approach also found voice in assertions that although racial issues mattered, the movement's approach to the issues was too negative. In such cases, respondents suggested that a more positive approach would be better and more easily digestible for others. Juan provides an example: "It's just not my thing, you know. It's important, but it's like so negative and a cycle where cops shoot blacks and then blacks shoot cops and it just goes on and on without any real positive solution." Nathan added,

> I feel like it's just a group of pissed off and outraged people who have one concern that started as a movement but just became an ongoing riot. And they're mad, and I get that, but they need to be more positive to get some sympathy or agreement on these things and that isn't happening.

Maria summed up the consensus of these respondents:

> It should focus more on positives and peaceful protest. Now, it's promoting violence and hate crimes. It's becoming more dark, and I want it to focus on the positive, on love and care versus fighting to be better. I mean, we are all part of the human race. We should focus on unity and embracing our differences. It should just promote happiness and just loving ourselves more.

Considering the popularity of more positive, love-and-happiness-based campaigns in recent years (Bernstein and Taylor 2013), it is not surprising that some respondents suggested that such tactics would be better. At the same time, it is telling that although more positive campaigns are generally more comfortable for the public (i.e., the dominant group the movement faces in a given conflict), they rarely accomplish more than modest or moderate goals at best (King 2008). More important, these responses line up with prior scholarship (Bonilla-Silva 2003), and the "it's important, but don't do it that way" tactics allow people to suggest they are against racist oppression although opposing efforts to explicitly challenge or reduce racism in society.

Although strategies whereby people say one thing and then do or support the doings of others have been outlined in many contexts related to race in the current era (Goss et al. 2017), we found similar strategies in relation to the Transgender Bathroom Access movement that are missing from existing literature. There is no definitive way to know whether (1) color-blind strategies of making sense of race have expanded to influence the ways people make sense of other minorities or (2) these strategies arose together in relation to multiple minority communities but were only first documented in relation to race. In either case, respondents suggest that these tactics may be used in relation to any minority community. As noted above, they appeal to order to suggest the "way

things are" make sense while both voicing support for transgender rights and opposing action that might make things better for trans people.

As the following excerpt from Thomas suggests, people may appeal to order by saying that they support transgender people before then denigrating them (i.e., similar to "I'm not racist, but . . ." rhetoric):

> I think those trans people deserve rights, they really do, but the way I view it is you can identify as whatever, but when you go to the extreme of changing yourself or how bathrooms work, I don't agree with that because that's not the way things work. Surgery doesn't qualify you to be treated different. Either way, I just don't agree with that, but I have no problem with them, you know.

Juan deployed a similar "rhetorical back and forth" (Bonilla-Silva 2003) when he talked about Transgender Bathroom Access: "I'm all about equality for them, but when it comes to bathrooms, I would be uncomfortable, and I would absolutely not let my child go in a bathroom like that." Mark added, "I don't know if I really agree with the bathroom thing, but I think they should have equal rights, of course. The bathroom thing, well, we should just keep it that way, it's been working." In these and other cases, respondents drew a rhetorical line between personal expressions of support and political actions that could support transgender people. In so doing, they appealed to the way things are while also suggesting they were caring people.

We also found examples of the "it's important, but don't do it that way" rhetoric in relation to trans people. As Nathan illustrates, these statements involved supporting transgender existence as an individual choice that should not disrupt others:

> The U.S. was based on having rights and freedom, but the bathroom thing is going too far. It's the wrong approach. If you're a female who wants to be a boy, so be it and vice versa, but those are your decisions. Society shouldn't cater to your needs because you decided to have a sex change. It's about order and people fitting into their place; without that society loses its boundaries and respect for one another.

Even more explicitly, Lisa noted, "Society has become so sensitive. People all should have equal rights. But, like the bathroom thing? I mean, some things just don't need to be changed, it's just a bathroom." Echoing arguments often directed at other minority groups throughout history (Gates 2013), these respondents also often suggested, as illustrated by Daniel, that it takes a while for societies to adapt, and the bathroom issue was just too much too soon:

> It's just too much change at once, especially since it just became legal for gay people to get married, and I know in my family that was a tough one to swallow. So, I think it's too much and even harder for people to accept transgender people in public restrooms.

In sum, respondents who voiced both support and opposition for the movements appealed to order to suggest that although they wanted equality, the methods that were being used to achieve equality were too disruptive. As race scholars have noted in relation to color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Goss et al. 2017), this allowed them to both voice support and oppose change. In this case, however, these strategies found voice not only in relation to race but also in relation to gender, which suggests that these strategies may be more broadly applied and that understanding contemporary methods of obscuring oppression may require learning from the insights of scholarship focused on colorblind, or otherwise inequality-blind, strategies.

DISMISSING OPPRESSION

Goffman (1959) famously defined social life as an "information game" wherein people interact with and make sense of themselves and others by defining or "framing" (Goffman 1974) situations in specific ways on the basis of their existing beliefs and concerns. Building on these insights, social movement scholars have demonstrated many ways movements frame their arguments to gain support for varied political goals (Snow et al. 1986; Stryker et al. 2000). Likewise, scholarship has shown how people construct and maintain patterns of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression by framing different types of people and activities as evidence of superior or subordinate quality (e.g., Schwalbe et al. 2000). In all such cases, people mobilize the information at their disposal to confirm or deny the claims of others in ways that "make sense" in relation to their beliefs.

Historically, one type of framing that plays a significant role in inequality involves the ways people become aware or avoid notice of oppression (Collins 2005). Especially given that marginalized

populations are less likely to receive attention in mainstream education or media, their experiences are often missing from dominant narratives about "the way the world works" (Loewen 1995). As such, people often rely upon mainstream depictions of minorities as, consciously or otherwise, they form definitions of marginalized groups. In so doing, as Bonilla-Silva (2003) showed in stories white people tell about race and Ridgeway (2011) showed in men's reactions to sexism, privileged individuals may rely on broader cultural narratives that paint minorities in a negative light to dismiss the concerns (Martin 2001). Here, we outline how respondents who opposed Black Lives Matter and Transgender Bathroom Access movements engaged in such dismissal by framing movement concerns as overreactions and falsehoods. In doing so, they sidestepped racism and cissexism by dismissing oppression.

In the transgender case, dismissals often took the form of reframing the issue to suggest that bathroom access is not the real problem (also see Mathers 2017 for similar assertions) but that if things changed, that would cause problems. That is, some respondents did not object to the methods activists used to demand equality; rather, they rejected the notion that current conditions were at all unequal. David offers an illustrative example:

> What they're saying is not fair to others, I mean, they want to use any bathroom they want to, but other people in that bathroom have no say. I did not sign up for that. I mean, I could easily walk into a store tonight and use the female bathroom, and nobody would say anything. If they did I could sue, I could do that and get away with it. That's the real problem, but they want to say we're the problem.

Susan had a similar take:

> The real problem is that it's been made into a bigger deal than it should be. I mean, I have never seen a place without single stalls, and if I were them, I would use that by default. But, the issue is, well, people are afraid of those who would abuse the bathroom thing, people that would take advantage of it. It's not fear of them, but of what could happen and that is the real point that I think gets missed in all this.

Respondents also dismissed transgender activists' concerns by reproducing rhetorical concerns about women and children mobilized in the 1980s to oppose lesbian and gay rights (Fetner 2008; Mathers 2017) and in the 1950s to oppose racial rights movements (Gates 2013). As Donny illustrates, this involved mobilizing narratives linking marginalized people to dangerous predators who might harm children:

> Where do we draw the line? If a dude threw on a dress and went into the girl's bathroom and your daughter was there, what about that? It's nothing against the transgender community because they are good people, but you don't know if the person is a predator or not. Predators would have this option now, and can take that option and use it to harm women. So, again, like where do we draw the line?

As was true in prior decades, these narratives find voice in opposition to rights movements despite the lack of any evidence of such links to date. Like Donny and others, Lynn sounds a similar alarm:

> You always hear about how predators are everywhere and you hear about rape, so, you know, I would prefer separate bathrooms and maybe family bathrooms if you feel uncomfortable for the sake of everybody. Keep girls and guys separate because we are different, and it has nothing to do with anything else. I don't want it, and I'm against it if the government is going to fund it. I shouldn't have to pay for others to use the bathroom or to worry more about predators, you know? It's a private expense that doesn't affect me, and at the same time, it's not a good idea for just safety, so I don't want it.

Rather than considering transgender people's ongoing disclosures about harassment, physical violence, and other difficulties at the hands of cisgender people when using public restrooms, these respondents reframed the problem to explain their opposition to equal bathroom access for all. Like respondents who downplayed the problems trans people report above, they dismissed oppression to explain their opposition to change.

Possibly because of the highly charged nature of racism in America (Gates 2013) or the level of visibility Black Lives Matter efforts have gained in mainstream media (Jackson and Welles 2016), the dismissal of Black Lives Matter claims was even more explicit. As with transgender concerns, respondents reframed the issue to suggest that

either (1) there was no racial problem or (2) black people were, in fact, the real problem. In so doing, they obscured oppression by framing black protesters as troublemakers and claims of racism as falsehoods or exaggerations. For example, Derek echoed many others by stating, "The real problem is that African Americans are negative to police officers. They don't like them, probably because of the media." Le added,

> Black people have a bad reputation, but the police have to make the correct judgment. It's not intentional, and I stand more with the white officers. BLM are frustrated, but they shouldn't act so violently because it won't help. Just don't do stupid things or cause trouble; protest isn't necessary. Most people have a general idea of how blacks behave; they have a reputation for being criminals. Police are not responsible for their actions.

Other respondents, like Matt quoted next, framed Black Lives Matter protests as a form of segregation that would ultimately cause more crime by interrupting the work of the police:

> All the movement does is make cops fluff their duties because they don't want to be accused of doing something wrong. I heard there has even been an increase in crime and homicides, especially in the big cities. This is because cops don't want to be confronted by media and conflict and all that stuff. They're being provoked by these people with cameras and stuff, and it's going to cause more violence and even more segregation because now it's a whole cop and black people thing.

Amelia added,

> Look, all lives matter. Saying "black lives matter" is a representation of a new age of segregation. Putting yourself in a group using the word *black* means you're only concerned with just that, being black. That's not how peaceful protest works or how you get your point across to the world. Not to mention, I mean, most of the black lives harmed were harmed by other blacks.

Although we could offer many more examples, the overall theme is clear: respondents who did not support the movements typically dismissed the claims of the movements while reframing marginalized people themselves as the real problem. In so doing, they, as other scholarship on "victim blaming" (Martin 2001) and "othering" (Schwalbe et al. 2000) notes, obscure oppressive forces and structures by dismissing the possibility that such oppression occurs in their world.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we used interviews with college students to outline a generic process in the reproduction of inequality we call *obscuring oppression*. Although the contents of this process may vary across settings, existing studies of racism and cissexism, as well as contemporary and historical cases of black and transgender people, suggest that obscuring oppression may be a common element in reactions to minority movements. Our analysis provides a conceptual framework for exploring how people (intentionally or otherwise) emphasize dominant notions of American morality and progress to sidestep or ignore oppression. We outlined three strategies—trusting the public, appealing to order, and dismissing oppression—that researchers may explore in other reactions to attempts to create social change.

Our findings have implications for understanding how people respond to minority claims that contradict their own beliefs. First, even if people agree with the goals of a movement, they may stop short of pushing for change by assuming the public will change once it learns problems exist. Second, people may agree and disagree with a movement by voicing support in the "abstract" (Bonilla-Silva 2003) while demonizing action that could lead to changes. Finally, people may resist a movement by using existing stereotypes to reframe the marginalized community as the real problem. Although our analysis of how people obscure oppression may be relatively unique at this point in sociological history, as a "sensitizing concept" (Blumer 1969), it provides a theoretical process that researchers may examine, test, explore, and explain via systematic mixed-methodological research.

Our findings also support previous work on colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003), benign sexism (Ridgeway 2011), and societal cissexism (Westbrook and Schilt 2014) and extend these findings by demonstrating the use of similar rhetoric to maintain the status quo in relation to multiple forms of inequality. Specifically, our analyses reveal some ways that people of varied races and

ethnicities, genders, sexualities, classes, and religions may engage in similar processes in relation to both gender and racial justice movements. As such, exploring patterns of obscuring oppression offers a chance for integrating studies in fields seeking to outline the maintenance of racial and gender oppression in society. Our findings thus echo intersectional scholarship (Crenshaw 1989), calling for systematic attention to the similar and different ways people maintain interlocking systems of inequality throughout their lives.

These findings also have implications for understanding reactions to other movements. The same way the processes we outline here find use in both black and transgender cases, existing scholarship implies similar patterns in other cases. For example, when gay, lesbian, and heterosexual people downplay monosexism or leave bisexual people out of sexual minority experience (Monro, Hines, and Osborne 2017) or when heterosexual people oppose gay and lesbian rights by saying "everyone should have rights," but "my religion doesn't agree" (Bernstein and Taylor 2013), they obscure oppression behind rhetorical shields. Similarly, when upper-class people give lip service to creating jobs and improving working conditions while advocating policies that eviscerate the working and lower classes (Hochschild 2016) or religious communities define the mere existence of the nonreligious, as well as LGBTQ people, as an assault on their freedom (Sumerau, Grollman, and Cragun forthcming), they maintain the "way things are" at the expense of others. In fact, each of these cases suggest nuanced, covert efforts to obscure oppression, as Bonilla-Silva (2003) suggested, may represent the dominant form of maintaining oppression in contemporary American society.

These observations have widespread implications for understanding and navigating contemporary inequalities. Within a social context in which voicing support for minorities is expected, but doing anything to actively support these communities is devalued, we may continue to see situations in which responses (i.e., to surveys, polls, and other response forms) and actions (i.e., activism, voting, and other activity) diverge (Hochschild 2016). As such, it may be useful to return to calls to investigate the differences in "what people say" versus "what people do." To this end, investigating processes whereby people obscure oppression may become a powerful tool for understanding practices that maintain the persistence of social inequality and possibilities for social change.

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NOTES

1. Although quantitative researchers operationalize ideologies in a wide variety of ways, we use qualitative notions of ideology as a broader social pattern or category of behavior to outline ways people mobilize such ideas and provide a baseline for future quantitative testing of such patterns (see also Collins 2005).
2. Although sociologists often separate cissexism and sexism for the purposes of analysis, we follow Serano (2007) in noting that although cissexism and sexism are separate systems, each ultimately relies upon the continued construction and maintenance of the other and each reinforces the subordination of transgender people, nonbinary people, and cisgender women to a dominant cisgender masculine ideal (Sumerau et al. 2016; Westbrook and Schilt 2014).
3. In other pilot studies, interviews were done about the Black Lives Matter movement and the Transgender Bathroom Access movement separately with different students as well as in the combined form of this study. There was no difference in the patterns of response when asked separately or during a shared interview and no differences in the patterns between the pilot sample interviews and the 35 in this study.
4. Although we compare and contrast black and transgender history in this section for the purposes of clarity, it is important to note overlap in these histories, such as the case of Jane Crow segregation noted in historical analysis of black transgender people (Rosenberg 2017).
5. Although we focus on patterns in black, trans, and trans black histories, marginalized groups experience oppression in similar and different ways over time (Crenshaw 1989). There are thus many parts of black experience and transgender experience that differ. There are also many similarities. The citations in this section offer examples, historical and at present, of both for further consideration.

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